

Hard Knocks

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Hard Knocks

by [TempestRising](#)

Summary

Tony gets a foster kid as a PR stunt to distract from his Iron Man disasters. That foster kid is Peter Parker, who's been kicked around the system for months. Peter is hesitant to trust a "new family" and frankly Tony is, too. Cue bonding. Cue bad foster stereotypes. Cue the Avengers taking in baby Peter.

Or: Yes this is the musical Annie.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Overture

"Why any kid would want to be an orphan is beyond me."

-Annie, the musical

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Peter was going to a group home this time, she said as if the last three placements, with four or five other fosters and too little space hadn't been "group homes" too. But this one was different, a boy's detention facility run like juvie. There'd be rules, his caseworker warned, and he'd have to really follow this this time or the next step would be juvie.

"I followed the rules last time, too!" Peter tried to protest. He had gotten a bruised cheek and empty stomach for his trouble.

"Peter..." Mrs. Grace was nice enough but always seemed tired, stretched thin. "You've been kicked out of the last six homes you've been in. Six homes in five years! You can't tell me you always followed the rules."

"The first one wasn't my fault! Four kids were removed from there because the Klebods were using their basement as a bedroom," Peter reasoned. "Then the Hannigans tried to keep me from going to school. And Mr. Jeffry threw me into a wall for trying to get one of the other kids food. Is any of that my fault?"

"You have an inability to keep your head down. If you'd stop playing hero-"

"The kids were starving!" Peter seethed.

Mrs. Grace closed her eyes, and closed Peter's case file. "We do have a home that will take you. You'll even get to stay in the city. Gateway House is in South Shore-"

"South Shore!" Peter gaped. "Staten Island? I'll never be able to go to Midtown. That's two hours on the train!"

"There's a very nice public school-"

Peter closed his eyes, the rest of Mrs. Grace's words washing over him. School was the only thing that had been keeping him sane since his parents disappeared just before he started seventh grade and he was dumped into the system. Being around Ned and MJ and even Flash made him feel...normal. Being someone's unwanted foster kid? Definitely not normal.

He tried to wrap his head around not going to Midtown and found that he couldn't even picture it. At midtown he had the teacher trying to get him a summer internship, and the academic decathlon team, lunch with Ned...all gone because some place in Staten Island had an empty cot for him. And here was Mrs. Grace telling him to keep his head down, to not make waves. All he wanted to do was scream. His parents were gone, and he didn't even know if he was supposed to be grieving for them, and everyone seemed more worried about where he was sleeping and whose responsibility he was than the fact that he was dying inside.

Ned's parents had tried to get custody of him, right after Peter got the news. They would take him until he finished school, they said. He could share with Ned. *We love Peter. We just want him to be treated right.*

And Mrs. Grace, who had been his caseworker from the beginning, just shook her head and said *it didn't work like that.*

Peter had told Ned about some of the messed up stuff that went down at his first foster home, but seeing Mrs. Leeds's face when she heard that Peter had been locked in his room all weekend for missing some chores...well, that shut him pretty quick. Months later, when violence came into the equation (with the Hannigans, home number three) Peter just covered the bruises and lied through his teeth.

Now he wouldn't even have someone to lie to.

"This is highly inappropriate!"

It was the tone that made Peter snap his head back up. Mrs. Grace had been spinning stories about how nice this group home was and he just didn't have the energy to listen. But now? Now she was practically on her feet. Because they were no longer alone. Someone had banged open the door to Mrs. Grace's office. And that someone looked a lot like the guy who graced most magazine covers and the nightly news.

"Mr. Stark as I told you on the phone there is an order to these things!"

"What order?" Mr. Stark said, whipping off his sunglasses and completely ignoring Peter, which was just as well. He probably looked more than a bit stupid with his mouth actually wide open. "I told you I need a kid, you did the house inspection, you saw my thirteen spare bedrooms. I want someone who's not a moron and looks cute in pictures. I was told there's thousands of foster kids in New York City alone. I bet at least one of them wants a bed in Avengers Tower."

Avengers Tower? Peter knew the building, of course he did. He may or may not slightly obsessively stalk everything else about Stark Industries. That summer internship the teacher at Midtown was helping him with? That was an SI thing. Everything else was impressed by OsCorps's fancy campus but Tony believed in SI's mission. Ned said he sounded like a fawning lover when he started waxing poetic about Tony Stark. What could Peter say? They had a genius within a mile of their house. Tony Stark was either going to save the world or end it, and he appeared to have a lot of fun either way.

"Mr. Stark, even if you have been cleared for home inspection there's still classes-paperwork-"

"Look, think about the low-lifes you usually have in here wanting to foster, right? The ones who do it for the paycheck. At least you know that I won't steal the eight hundred bucks or whatever it is a month. I can buy my own liquor, and if the aliens keep showing up I have my own punching bag. Nice shiner, by the way, kid. Your awesome foster parent with all the classes and paperwork do that to you?"

Peter sank in his seat. Great, so Mr. Stark knew of his existence and thought that he was some pitiable bystander. A prop to his story.

"I know I'm not the stand-up guy, right? That's sort of why I need a foster kid. But Pepper's around, JARVIS is around, there's heroes crawling all over my apartment-I see your face, you don't think that's a good thing. But I never get robbed! Kidnapped, sure, but-I'm safe, okay? I have money, I have space, with the Accords still doing who-knows-what I've got the time. Look. Grace, is it? Look, Grace. I was never taken care of as a kid. Let me take care of someone else."

Peter wasn't sure if it was all an act but that last part? Mr. Stark sounded legitimately concerned.

Mrs. Grace wasn't moved. "Mr. Stark, foster children are not toys, they're not PR opportunities, they are not props. Being a foster parent is a commitment, possibly a years-long commitment. I simply don't think you have the aptitude for-"

"I'll do it."

Peter barely even registered that he was the one who had said those words until Mr. Stark's gaze snapped back to him. Peter tried not to flinch into his seat. It wasn't like Tony Stark was all that imposing as a man—he was shorter than Peter had imagined. But the way he held himself, the way he was standing, and Peter was not...well, he didn't have all that many recent associations with powerful men that had ended well.

Mr. Stark didn't say anything. He just sort of tilted his head to the side.

This was his chance. Mr. Stark! Avenger's Tower! And Avengers Tower was in Manhattan. He could still get to Midtown for school. Could Ned come by the Tower? Would he meet Captain America? Would he meet Black Widow?

He was getting ahead of himself. First he needed to get Mr. Stark to take him.

"I know that you're probably looking for a little kid," Peter said, his argument forming even as he spoke. "Cute pictures, right? But you've got a busy lifestyle, you know, saving the world and stuff. I won't cramp your style, I promise, and I won't destroy what is probably a very, very, very - um, cool apartment. I bet. Not that I've seen Hawkeye's Instagram posts. Um. And I know I'm not photogenic? Like, now?" Peter waved a hand at the bruise on his cheek and Mr. Stark zeroed in on it. "But I swear I look decent when I don't look like...shit. Damn. I'll do it, is all I'm saying. If you'll take me."

Please take me.

Mrs. Grace was really on her feet now. "Peter, honey, you know that this is all some PR stunt, right? Iron Man's in hot water and Tony Stark thinks he can win points by inviting a foster kid into his home."

Mr. Stark's mouth twitched.

"I know," Peter said. "But everyone has something, right? Like Mr. Stark said, most foster parents want money. Or, I guess some like the power they have over kids. Maybe someone actually want to help, I don't know, I haven't met those. But," Peter shrugged, "no one does something for nothing. I'll be a PR stunt if it means I can go to Midtown."

"Midtown?" Mr. Stark asked. So at least he was paying attention a little.

"Peter's school," Mrs. Grace said. "Peter was rather upset when I told him his next placement wouldn't be close enough for him to attend."

Mr. Stark frowned. "I'd be pissed, too. Midtown Prep? That's a great school. SI hires a bunch of interns from that school."

"I know," Peter said.

Mr. Stark was looking at him now. Really, really looking at him. "I have robots. They're nosy little fuckers. Also, I'm not kidding about the kidnapping thing. Also, I'm told I snore."

"I would love to meet JARVIS." Peter could barely keep the squeal out of his voice. "And

Butterfingers! And-what's the other one?"

"The other one is 'I am officially confiscating Clint's Instagram.'"

Mr. Stark waved a hand in a way that Peter would get used to in the coming weeks. It was the 'come with me if you don't want to be left behind' half-wave. So Peter followed. God knows he didn't want to be left behind.

"There's a proper order to these things!" Mrs. Grace sputtered.

She really was a nice lady. Peter doubled back and gave his caseworker a hug. "Thanks for all your help Mrs. Grace."

She paused for just a moment before she hugged him back. MJ never hugged him. Mrs. Leeds hugged him once. Ned slapped him on the back like boys are supposed to do. Only Mrs. Grace ever really leaned into him like this, like she could hold on forever. Mrs. Grace really, really made Peter miss his mom. "Surprise inspections," Mrs. Grace promised, speaking loudly enough for Mr. Stark to hear. "Every day."

"Every day is hardly a surprise," Peter teased.

Mrs. Grace leaned back and rubbed a thumb over Peter's bruised cheek. "Next time this happens you run, okay honey? No more being a hero. Heroes don't live long, and you're my responsibility until you turn eighteen."

"Actually," Mr. Stark said, putting a hand on Peter's shoulder (don't jump don't cower don't scream he won't hurt you) "I think he's mine now."

Maybe

Chapter Summary

In which Annie gets to the mansion.

Grace: *Miss Hannigan, I am the private secretary to Oliver Warbucks.*

Miss Hannigan: *The Oliver Warbucks? The millionaire?*

Grace: *Oh no. Oliver Warbucks the billionaire.*

-Annie, the musical.

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Peter spent the ride over jumping every time Mr. Stark started to ask him a question and then cut himself off. The ride went something like this:

"So, Peter is it? Don't worry about the paperwork back there. Or the money. I didn't, you know, buy you or anything, I really did go through all the foster parent crap. Well, most of the foster parent crap. Can I curse in front of kids? Are you religious? I probably should have asked. You're not religious, are you? I don't censor myself, just know that half the time I'm not even talking to you it's just words manifesting out of my mouth. Anyway, I did most of the foster crap. The classes were a ridiculous and I caused a scene when I showed up to one so there may have been a promise to build a new community center in exchange for an expedited process but again, don't think of yourself as bought and sold. More like a loan. Like a painting."

Peter kept opening his mouth only to close it when the window for his answers disappeared as soon as it came. He was already sitting awkwardly in the passenger seat. He'd never been in the passenger seat before. When his parents were alive he was too young, and they didn't often use a car. With the foster parents...well, the ones that kept cars in the city barely wanted the kids in them at all, let alone in the front seat.

The world moved by so quickly from up here.

"I didn't think paintings were on loan," Peter said, mostly to himself.

"What's that?" Mr Stark took his hands off the wheel long enough to snap. He moved at a pace that left Peter dizzy to watch it. "Speak up, kid. If you don't say what you want you don't get what you want."

"I just was saying," Peter cleared his throat. "I don't think paintings are loanable items. They're not, like, at the library."

Mr. Stark shrugged. "They're loanable to me. Hey, look, we got a welcome party."

And indeed they were already pulling up to Avengers Tower, and there was a bit of a welcome party. A youngish, blondish man stood on the sidewalk, StarkPad in hand, seemingly oblivious to the stares the bow and quiver on his back drew. Peter told himself that he had to stop fanboying

every time he saw an Avenger. If he was going to live here now he would have to play it cool.

But. Holy shit. He sort of loved Hawkeye. Every kid his age did. While Captain America was, like, a dad's favorite super hero, and Iron Man and Black Widow were often too political for much conversation, Hawkeye seemed to be every kid's dream of what being a super hero would be like. He was active on SnapChat and Instagram, posting stories of Thor's misadventures with all-you-can-eat buffets, doing trick shots for the camera, liking photos of grumpy cats that people tagged him in. Not quite thirty, he was a dual member of the Avengers and SHIELD with an adorable uptight kind-of boyfriend and still he posted about late-night snack runs and hate-watching the end of "How I Met Your Mother" to see if it was as bad as everyone said it was.

"I'm telling you kid, this is only gonna work if you keep up. I'm not a valet service. Okay, I am a valet service, but only because JARVIS insisted I pick you up in person. Out. Out. Out!"

Mr. Stark was holding open the door. How? They were in the middle of the street? Did billionaires who owned blocks not have to worry about parking? Peter shuffled out of the car, reaching back to grab his trash bag worth of things. He felt embarrassed before he even straightened up. Mr. Stark, in a designer suit and a watch worth more than most houses; Hawkeye in a fashionably ripped tank top; and Peter with his hole-y sneakers and straining garbage bag of worldly possessions.

"Well don't you look perfectly pathetic?" Mr. Stark mused, and maybe he meant it as another one of his jokes but it hit way too close to home. Peter blushed. From somewhere behind them: the click of a camera's shutter.

He couldn't even look at Hawkeye. He'd known that he was signing up to be a PR stunt but he didn't expect to feel this...scrutinized. Like someone had examined him and found him lacking.

"Let's move this party inside," Hawkeye suggested even as Mr. Stark went off to talk to the press or yell at them or something. He walked off, anyway, without giving Peter the first clue of what to do.

So he moved the party inside.

"Don't mind Tony. Or, okay, you can mind him. He used to get on my nerves, too. But deep down, and I'm talking fiery depths here. Deep down he's a decent guy." Hawkeye hesitated. "I'm 80% sure he's a decent guy."

Someone walked into the lobby behind them and Peter could hear more cameras clicking away. He looked down at the shiny floors. He wasn't sure what to do with his trash bag-he was afraid to carry it, it was bursting with all the stuff he'd tried to stuff in there-but he didn't want to put it on the polished floors...

"You can call me Clint. Sorry, I gotta play tough guy for a few minutes. Tony texted on his way over and said we needed to get you security clearance ASAP. Luckily, I've got an in..."

"Phil Coulson," Peter said, nodding before he realized that he'd read about that on a conspiracy theory blog and it definitely wasn't supposed to be common knowledge.

Clint stiffened a little but ended up smiling. "At least one of us has done the research. So, I'm going to need your full name, birthday, city of birth, hospital of birth, fingerprints, skin samples, hair samples, retina scan..."

The shiny tile floor suddenly seemed a lot closer. Peter didn't even realize he was swaying until Clint grabbed his arm. "Woah! Okay, damsel, no passing out on me. You gonna be okay? Need a

drink? When'd you eat last?"

It was Saturday. Usually he'd eat in school but Midtown had been having half days all week thanks to a busted pipe. It was December and freezing and the kids were hungrier than Peter. Mrs. Grace kept stale nuts in a bowl on her desk and Peter had taken a few handfuls...six hours ago? Eight?

Clint must have seen something on his face because he swore, first at Peter (he didn't flinch he didn't) then, much more colorfully, at Tony. Then he hauled Peter into a nearby elevator and jammed a finger on the button.

"I thought there was security clearance?" Peter closed his eyes as the elevator lurched upwards. At least he'd kept a hand on his trash bag. "And-shouldn't we wait for Mr. Stark?"

Clint looked insulted. "I live here, too! I can play host! I'm hospitable!"

Peter looked at his feet. He'd learned a lot in five years and this was not how the first day usually went. Usually the list of rules began in the car, and Peter had heard it all: keep your mouth shut, no touching the furniture, no eating any food not given to you, no asking for money or possessions, keep your mouth shut, chores equal food, get a job and give us your paycheck, watch the younger kids, keep your mouth shut, take care of the pets, hand over your valuables, keep your mouth shut. "But," he decided to throw caution to the wind. "I haven't heard the rules yet."

A muscle in Clint's jaw jumped but he swallowed, hard, and when he spoke his tone was still light. "Rules? Oh, kid. I think you're gonna like it here."

When the elevator doors opened Peter tried not to gape. There was so much space. An entire wall lined with windows, a kitchen gleaming so brightly he doubted anyone had ever used it, an atrium off to the side where Captain America was stretching.

Peter tried to retreat back into the elevator but Clint propelled him forward. "Stevie! Wanna give the All-American tour?"

"I'm late for a shower. You're late for a shower. We have that thing tonight. Hello." Captain America said every sentence in the same even slightly curious tone of voice. "You must be from the orphanage."

"Don't got orphanages anymore, Grandpa," Clint teased. "Now we call 'em fosters."

Captain America's enormous, patriotic brow furrowed. "So are you not an orphan?"

Peter tried to stand as much in front of his trash bag as possible. He was seriously weighing the benefits of leaving his entire life in the elevator if it meant Captain America wouldn't have to see the straining red elastic bands. After a bit of shuffling he realized both Cap and Clint were still staring at him. "I'm...pretty sure I'm an orphan," Peter mumbled. It wasn't his favorite subject. "My parents were scientists? And one day they went away and never came back."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Captain America said, and he did sound sorry. It was like the man couldn't be anything less than 100% genuine. "If it helps, we're all orphans here."

"If Tony's actually going to be Peter's foster father, than I don't know if he's technically an orphan," Clint mused.

Captain America shrugged and saluted. "Good to meet you. Peter, was it? Did Tony mention you'd have the Avengers as roommates?"

"Most of us drift in and out," Clint clarified. "Nat's on a special op, she won't be back for a few months. Bruce is in some -stan country giving a lecture on life saving bacteria. I'm here a lot when Phil's away, and Steve and Tony are trying to figure out if they're going to kill each other or fuck."

"Language!" Steve barked while Peter smothered a laugh. "Did he get clearance to get all the state secrets, Agent?"

"I'm running it. Look at this baby face, Cap. Tell me you don't want to squeeze his cheeks!"

Captain America smirked, then jerked a thumb at a closed door. "I call the good shower. Where's Tony? It's getting late."

The sun had started to sink while Peter was in the car and the penthouse gave a crisp view of the city winking into night. Was it late? Peter felt like he'd been up for days. Being yanked out of one home and thrust into another did that to you. He wished he could call Ned and tell him about all this - the Avengers! - but his phone had met a...series of unfortunate events...several weeks prior. Being a high schooler with no phone made him more of an outcast than being a high schooler in foster care.

He still had his laptop. It was school-issued, so his foster parents hadn't been able to confiscate it or sell it, not without a lot of explanation owed to Midtown Prep. It didn't have the greatest camera, so he couldn't send photographic proof, but he could still tell Ned and MJ that he'd been spared being exiled to Staten Island. And, also: Avengers.

He was contemplating the laptop squished against the side of the plastic bag when Hawkeye touched his arm (don't flinch don't flinch don't flinch). "You want first shower? Pepper literally does an inspection before these things, as if men can't put themselves together for a black-tie event." He must have seen something on Peter's face because he added, gently; "don't worry, I bet Tony left something for you on your bed."

Peter still wasn't sure what Clint was talking about so he latched onto the part of the sentence that made sense. "My bed?"

"Egyptian cotton sheets and soundproofed door. Told you you'd like it here."

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Three hours later Peter was in another doorway, looking into yet another impossible room.

Clint and Agent Coulson glided past him, as did Pepper, chatting with Captain America (on the way over the war hero had told Peter to call him Steve which was such an impossible request that Peter could just shake his head in amazement). Only Tony stayed by Peter's side as he stared at the ballroom. There were flowers tumbling from the ceilings, fountains of Champagne and chocolate, sugar castles spun so delicately they looked like glass, fish stuffed with garlic and rosemary, a whole pig roasted to perfection. The food was incredible, but it was just decoration for the people; elegant ladies and dashing men, all turning like flowers towards the sun when the Avengers entered the room. A short round of applause flurried through the guests.

Peter recognized two Senators and a woman who he was pretty sure was a Princess, in addition to a girl who'd recently starred in a Netflix show and a trio of boys who had put out the first ever Thanksgiving song to crack the Billboard Top 100. All of them were sizing people up, no doubt wondering who he was.

Looking around the room, Peter was wondering that himself.

"I could just wait with the car," Peter suggested, not for the first time.

Tony huffed, "I thought you knew the score, kid. This is all for PR, right? So you need to be the places we're promoting. Smile."

Peter did not smile. He'd barely registered the word when a bulb flashed in front of his eyes.

"Seriously, though," Tony continued, "just smile, nod, and keep your mouth shut."

And then Tony left, too.

Peter spun through the crowds, doing exactly what Mr. Stark said. Smile, nod when someone asked him a question, excuse himself to find some more food to pile on top of his feelings. He had some chips and water back at the apartment, but the meat was the first he'd had in weeks that hadn't come from the school cafeteria or Ned's packed lunches. He lingered near the tables and savored.

"Tempting, right?" Clint asked when he found Peter piling on another piece of bacon-wrapped something. "When Phil first started dragging me to these events he tried to get me to stop eating. Bought me dinner on the way over and everything. I couldn't stop stealing the bread. Not for a long time."

Clint looked pointedly at Peter's jacket. The pockets were too small for bread but he was shoving them in the place between the jacket and the shirt, keeping one hand in a pocket to create a little basket for food.

He blushed mightily. "Sorry. Sorry! I'll---I'll stop."

"Keep eating, kiddo. The food's not going anywhere, I promise, but if you need your own stash? I get it. I do. Next time we'll bring some tupperware to these things."

Peter stared after Clint as he sauntered back over towards Phil Coulson. The young archer was quickly becoming his favorite.

He did stay next to the table, eating plate after plate. He started to feel full, and then overfull, but eating was safe. People stopped asking him questions. And the food was so good. How long had it been since he'd had melted chocolate? Since he'd had pork, or fish? He was sure he'd never had duck. He ate a marshmallow and stared at the princess and wondered how in the world he'd ended up here.

"So are you Tony Stark's newest boy toy?" someone with an open notepad said. He wasn't even looking at Peter, he was too busy scribbling things down. "Bold of him to bring you into society, but I guess we all have our vices. Please tell me you're under eighteen. I've been trying to get Stark on this one for years."

Peter blinked, confused. "I'm...fifteen?"

"Fifteen?" the reporter, or whoever he was, nearly crowed. Heads turned. "Can I quote you on that? Nevermind, this is the scoop of my career. How long have you been with Tony Stark? No, you don't even have to say anything, okay, just nod when I get there. Six months? A year? Do you stay in the Tower? What's he like in bed?"

Suddenly instead of staring at the ruddy face of this reporter guy, Peter was staring at the Pepper's red backless dress. "Any questions about Tony's work with foster children should be directed at the Stark Foundation. And, Mr. Lippin, haven't we previously had a conversation about harassing dinner guests?"

"Tony's harboring a fifteen year old?" the reporter pressed.

A different hand spun Peter around. "What did you say?" Tony hissed, his tone low and menacing.

And suddenly Peter wasn't in that room anymore, wasn't talking to Tony Stark and the rest of the superheroes. He was ten, the looming face of a woman holding a broken lamp "what did you do?" He was eleven, sitting outside the guidance counselor's office while his foster mother strode in, "what did you say?" Mrs. Hannigan holding an empty can of soup, "what did you do?"

Always that tone. Always a hiss, face close to his, breath on his body.

Peter gulped, trying to catch his breath, trying to ground himself. He glanced back at the reporter, at the party, at the beautiful scene he didn't belong in. He steadied himself, looking up at Mr. Stark---

And then he vomited all over Iron Man's expensive shoes.

Tomorrow

Chapter Summary

In which Peter's past comes back to haunt him and Ned learns a secret or two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Buddha says that a child without courage is like a night without stars."

Punjab, Annie - the musical

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Peter was toweling his hair after the second shower of the evening when there was a knock at the bedroom door. He moved instinctively behind the bed before shaking his head at himself - he wasn't some little kid. He wasn't going to hide from this. He'd fucked up his end of the deal and now was time to face the consequences. So he carefully folded the damp towel and smoothed it over the desk chair (he had a desk! a chair! a bed! so what if the night had been more hectic than he'd imagined, if Tony Stark was more distant - the accommodations alone made it worth it. Right?) and cleared his throat. "Come in."

Tony Stark strode into the bedroom like...well. Like he owned the place. He sniffed only a little at Peter's sad little trashbag, unopened next to the king sized bed. "So. This is the part where I apologize for being an ass and throwing you in that whole situation and also for apparently letting you consume alcohol, although to be fair I didn't know about that last one so that's not my fault."

"You did know we were going to a party, though," Peter pointed out before clamping his mouth shut again.

Mr. Stark raised an eyebrow. "The mouse speaks! Good, I thought I brought home the wrong kid. Where was the sass, like, an hour ago? I picked you - well, I picked you for a couple of reasons. Diapers aren't my thing. The Midtown stuff is impressive. But you know the score, kid. Or at least you did. Banter. Back and forth. You need to call me out on my crap or this isn't going to work. I've been told that I can be a bit of a bully."

"Is it a fifteen-year-old's job to make you a better person?" Peter asked.

The quiet thing hadn't worked. And, sure, he could claim he'd been overwhelmed - he had been overwhelmed! - but two seconds after Peter blew chunks all over Iron Man he realized that this was at least half his fault. He wasn't a child. He *did* know the score. And he should have had better control over his emotions, or at least his appetite. Tonight wasn't the first time he'd been presented with food after a starvation diet, though it had been the first time the food was quite so tempting...

Still, he needed to speak up for himself. It was the bane of a foster kid's existence, but the problem with the transient thing was that if you don't say what you want you don't get what you want.

So Peter would start, you know. Saying.

For a moment he thought Mr. Stark would yell, which was a weird thought because Mr. Stark hadn't yelled yet. Hissed, sure, soft and scary at the party. Rolled his eyes in exasperated disapproval, yes, about a million times. Laughed and ordered and snarked, sure, but he didn't yell. He didn't shout Peter down. And he didn't yell now. "Ah, Pepper's gonna love you. You're right, of course. Don't blame the victim, right? Not your fault for not standing up to me. You'll learn. I'm still trying to teach the other guys and one of them is supposedly a hundred years old."

To Peter's surprise Mr. Stark sat down on the edge of the king sized bed. He was out of his party clothes, too, and in a soft-looking cotton T-shirt. "You read me dead-on, kid. This is 88% a PR thing. Blew up something I wasn't supposed to blow up, pissed off a lot of someones I have no business pissing off. The usual. But 12% of me also looked around this apartment and thought - even with an entire team of super heroes living here, you know, it's still a pretty big place. And in New York you're always hearing about the homeless youth population. So 12% of me is a bleeding heart. Maybe less. Jury's still out."

Peter sat down on the other side of the king sized bed. It spoke the sheer nature of the bed that they were still several feet apart. "I am grateful. Nerd in a group home is a cliche I didn't want to play out. And I am a nerd. I really just want to go to school." Peter yawned, hugely, right in the older man's face. "Geeze. Sorry. Go to school and go to bed."

Mr. Stark glanced at his watch and winced. "Not the A+ parenting day I was hoping for. I was picturing something with ice cream and balloons, though, to be fair, I did imagine walking out with a five year old in more than just musculature." He winced again, waving his hand like he could disperse his words. "Sorry. Sorry! None of this is about you. I will get better at this. I eventually get better at everything."

Peter nodded, slowly. "I just want to know what the rules are around here."

For a moment he thought Mr. Stark would laugh that off, too, but instead the man just nodded slowly. "Well, I guess we'll work on that, too. 'Night, kiddo. You want the door closed? It doesn't lock, unfortunately, too many near-death experiences, but if you scream there will be several weapons in here within moments. And JARVIS. Don't underestimate the power of omnipotent AI."

"Omnipresence is not omnipotence," a precise British voice hummed from the ceiling.

"I'm not arguing philosophy with you again," Tony called back.

Peter began to peel back the covers. Maybe Mr. Stark would stay nearby, carrying on a one-man conversation. Maybe he'd dream of chocolate fountains and an elevator that only moved up. Maybe tomorrow he'd tell Ned about being rescued by actual superheroes.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Tomorrow.

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It was still dark when Peter's eyes snapped open. There was a figure crouched on the end of the huge bed. He thought of Mr. Stark - scream, weapons - mouth halfway open when a StarkPad flicked on and illuminated...Hawkeye. Clint. The person who'd sat next to him on the tense car ride home and kept his knee pressed against Peter's. If he trusted anyone in the tower, it was the young acrobat archer.

But Clint wasn't smiling. Peter scrambled to sit up, wondering what time it was. This deep into winter it could be two am or it could be nearly seven. The sun came up weakly when it decided to come up at all.

Clint spun the StarkPad around. The first thing Peter glanced at was the time: four am. The second thing...oh, shit.

"Your background check came through," Clint said grimly.

Peter grabbed the StarkPad. Yup, that was his mug shot all right. The police said that his record would be sealed until he was eighteen, but apparently that didn't apply to superheroes or weird government entities. Peter scrolled through the list of year-old charges. Assault. Robbery. Resisting arrest. "I can explain!"

Clint put a finger up to his lips, then looked meaningfully at the ceiling. "JARVIS, can you keep a secret?"

"My first duty is to Mr. Stark. If Mr. Parker proves a threat, he must know about it." The AI paused. "However, I have the ability to listen and judge for myself. I will soundproof this room. Would you like me to seal the vents, Clint?"

A grate snapped shut of its own accord and the lights in the room glowed dimly, enough for Peter to see Clint blushing. "I don't live in the vents," the archer said defensively. "I just...whatever, I like to listen in to things. Because I also grew up in a bad place, and I also did some stuff I'm not proud of. Phil and Fury gave me a second chance. Well, Phil shot me and then gave me a second chance. I'm trying to pay it forward without bloodshed."

Peter tried to arrange himself on the fluffy pillows in a way that didn't make him look small and scared. "I appreciate that."

Clint ran a hand through his blond hair. "Look," the older man said - though, sprawled on Peter's bed in sleep-pants, distractingly shirtless, he looked less a "man" than some CW version of a teenager, youthful and sans pimples - "You know my story, right? I get the stealing. I even understand running from the cops. It's the assault -"

"That wasn't me!" Peter swore. "That was Rooster!"

"You beat up a rooster?" Clint crossed his legs and leaned forward. "Why don't you start from the beginning?"

Peter took a deep breath. He'd already told this story so many times. To Mrs. Grace, who'd gone with him to Midtown when he was summoned to the principal's office. He'd been a Freshman then, his position and scholarship hanging in the balance. He'd talked his way out of that, so...

He took a deep breath. "Rooster and his girlfriend Lily run this boarding house down in Queens. Every foster kid in the borough ends up with them at some point. They take in teenage boys, especially the ones about to age out, so it was me, Bug, and four kids about to turn nineteen.

"I think Rooster liked the older ones because he didn't have to worry about teachers asking about absences, but also the places Rooster sent them? Less questions when there's an older teen hanging around. Me and Bug were just...extra, I guess. He put us in the smallest bedroom and told us we were deaf and blind in that house. See nothing, you know?"

"I've heard that deal before." Clint's expression was souring.

"So I stayed late at school, stayed with Ned, hung at the library. There was a mess of crazy things in that house. Rooster owned other buildings, he ran gangs and gambling. He was like some sort of guy out of Prohibition, you know? A speakeasy mobster, except I'm pretty sure those old guys didn't sell guns and coke. That's what he had the older boys doing. They'd all been there a while, had these nice jackets and shoes. They called Rooster their 'uncle.'" Peter blanched at that.

Clint picked up on the problem. He wasn't a spy-slash-superhero for nothing. "Extra eyes in the house."

"And muscle. Rooster was always more of the con guy. Best liar in the city, but he wasn't all that scary on the outside. But these boys? When they weren't on the corner they were lifting." Peter rubbed his fist across his face. "When I first got into the system I thought that all the kids would stick together, but it's just like everywhere else. Biggest always wins. And Bug wasn't the biggest."

"Here I was hoping for one of those misnomer situations," Clint mused, "like when people call a chihuahua Brutus."

"Or Thor."

"Well," Clint grinned, "he is basically a chihuahua."

Peter sobered as he remembered those months in Rooster's flophouse. "Bug was small. I think he was fourteen but he looked ten. I made myself scarce, and I would've taken Bug with me but - well, Rooster had this girl. Lily. And I guess she took a shine to Bug. Rooster and his boys, they said it was the other way around, that *Bug* seduced *her*. But Bug was scared of shadows! He couldn't say boo to a goose! He'd been in the system since he was a baby, you know? He knew not to fuck around."

"Language," Clint chided. "You'll wake America's sensitive soul. But yeah, kid. Savvy."

"Rooster must have known about it. If you took an orange from the fruit bowl he knew about it, but I guess he thought it was funny, or he wanted Lily off his back, or something. He probably would have let it go on until one of his guys caught her and Bug in the act."

"And those big boys showed Rooster's displeasure with their fists?"

"Bingo."

"So how did the assault charges get to you? You try to take on one of the brutes?"

"I wasn't even there," Peter moaned. "I think I would have tried - I *like* to think I would have tried - but I was at academic decathlon practice when Rooster called. He never called, so I hustled home and ran into the police. Rooster's a great liar, you know. One of the greatest. He'd already gotten a word in to the police. Told them that Bug had been beaten up by one of his foster brothers who went on the run right after. Did a whole lot of backstory, too."

"And the cops just believed him?"

"This was after the stealing. I had a record, just not a violent one. And I guess Rooster was in deep with the local beat. Bug went to the hospital. I sat in jail until Mrs. Grace came to find me."

He hoped he wouldn't have to explain the other parts, the humiliating parts: going to school and the stares after he went into the principal's office and knowing that everyone else knew what had happened; trying to see Bug in the hospital and being told he wasn't allowed in the room, and writing him a letter and never getting a reply, and never seeing Bug again, not even a chance to

apologize about knowing what had happened between him and Lily for months and doing nothing; being moved to a new home, a nice one near school, and how his new foster parents requested a transfer after someone tipped them off to his supposedly sealed police report.

And now it was happening again.

He peeked up at Clint, who had lowered his StarkPad. "Look," the archer said, "I believe you. I get it. And I would bury this, except that they pay me to shoot people, not magic them off the internet. Someone is bound to find it and when they do they'll wonder why it was hidden. Things are always worse after you try to hide them away."

"So I need to tell Mr. Stark?" Peter felt his heart twist at the thought of bringing this to his newest...well, foster father didn't really seem to describe Tony.

"I'll try to hide this if that's the way you want to go. But living here means you're not just another foster kid anymore. Someone's going to go digging and they will find it."

A choice that wasn't really a choice at all. What else was new? Peter hugged his knees to his chest and allowed himself five seconds, just five seconds, to feel very small, and very scared.

Clint touched his knee. "If you want, we can tell him together. I dunno if you feel better having a bow by your side but I always do."

Peter nodded, scrubbing a hand over his face. And that's when his school alarm went off. Tomorrow had turned into today.

***.

Ned was shifting his weight nervously outside the school, peering through the crowd, standing up on his tip-toes only to slump back down. Peter watched the little dance for a moment before tapping him on the shoulder. He had to duck to avoid the enormous backpack when Ned spun around. "Peter!" Ned crowed, wrapping him in a tight hug. "I went by your house but you weren't there, and so I called Mrs. Grace because you weren't answering any of my messages and she said you were moved again. Ohmygod is that a black eye? Peter! Was it the Hannigans? Or the new people?"

"The Hannigans, Ned, stop touching it. Ow! I'm fine!"

"Why didn't you tell me!" Ned's hurt expression made Peter feel like he'd just kicked a puppy.

"It sort of escalated, it's fine." The bell rang. They had twenty minutes of homeroom, which was usually Peter's time to slip into the cafeteria and grab his free breakfast, never his favorite part of the day when surrounded by kids whose ideas of family vacations included Vale and Aruba. Ned started in the direction of the cafeteria and Peter grabbed his hand. "Actually, I already ate today."

Ate was an understatement. Captain America had made him oatmeal and pancakes and fruit and orange juice and cereal and French toast (*do you like French toast, Peter?*) and even made him coffee after lecturing about caffeine stunting growth.

Ned's eyebrows went up. "You already got a new placement? Awesome! What are they like? Are they in Queens?"

Peter glanced at the clock in the hallway. "You've got to promise not to tell anyone. Not even MJ."

"I wouldn't tell MJ anything, she scares me."

"And you've got to skip homeroom. This might take a while."

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Ned had given up on peeling his orange (Peter ended up grabbing his free breakfast. He let Ned have the fruit but stuffed the granola bar and cereal cup in his backpack. He'd lost his old food stash when he left the Hannigans) and was just staring at Peter. They were sitting outside in the courtyard, the only people dumb enough to be out there in the thirty-degree chill. "Holy cow. The Avengers? Did you meet Black Widow?"

"I already told you the people I met. Are Iron Man, Captain America, and Hawkeye not enough for you?"

"Is there really an AI system? Did you see Iron Man's lab? What's your bedroom like?" And then, as Ned tended to say exactly what was on his mind the moment he thought of it, his expression turned grim. "Wait, you're living with Tony Stark and he didn't hook you up with a new phone?"

"I've lived with him for less than twenty-four hours. I didn't want to bother him."

"He invented smart phones! He probably has some crazy hologram prototypes lying around, and I didn't know where you were all weekend because you're like some third-world kid without access to the internet." It was weird how quickly Ned could flip between amazed and indignant.

Peter blew on his knuckles. He hadn't wanted anyone overhearing his story but his thin jacket and uniform polo weren't exactly made to keep out the chill. Ned shucked off his goose-down jacket and draped it both him and Peter like a blanket. He was really the best sort of friend. Peter didn't even mention that, should anyone see them out there, the old rumors about the extent of his and Ned's friendship would start up again. That sort of gossip, the ordinary high school gossip, Peter preferred to the endless speculation about life as a foster kid.

Ned slipped him a sliver of orange and Peter ate it mechanically. "So Tony Stark is your new foster dad?"

"What a crazy sentence, right?"

Ned seemed to be choosing his next words carefully. "I'm sure that there's more to him than, you know, what we see on YouTube and whatever, but he doesn't seem like the dad type. Like, I guess he sort of houses the Avengers, and obviously he's the kind of genius who will either solve global warming or end up in global domination -- um, don't tell him I said that -- but is he..." Ned shrugged, "is he nice?"

Peter thought about the reporter's insinuation at the dinner last night, about Tony Stark's hissed threat, about the bed and breakfast he'd been presented with, about Captain America's shy lecture on the importance of a healthy diet and Hawkeye's maps on the best ways in and out of the tower. He had seen Hawkeye, Captain America, Phil Coulson, and Pepper Potts this morning, but he hadn't seen the man who'd supposedly taken him in. "Jury's still out on that one."

Ned's phone buzzed and he glanced at it in that second-nature way people were attuned to their devices. He blinked, then turned the phone so Peter could see the notification:

From the BuzzFeed news app: **Did Tony Stark just adopt the luckiest boy in New York???**

Peter grabbed the phone and fumbled with the password (Ned shared his phone often enough that Peter knew all his codes) praying the whole time, *please don't be a picture, please don't let there be a picture, please don't be a picture--*

He got the story open, and stared a miniature version of himself stuffed into the suit from last night's party.

Ned snorted softly over his shoulder. "Luckiest boy in New York. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Chapter End Notes

Saw Endgame, had some feelings, decided to write them out by letting Iron Man fumble around fatherhood. Thanks for all the reviews! They really do help me keep this going.

N.Y.C.

Chapter Summary

In which Peter's life sort of falls apart, comes back together, and falls apart again.

"I didn't want to be just another orphan, Mr. Warbucks. I wanted to believe that I was special. "

-From the musical Annie

By the time the final bell rang, he didn't want to be Peter Parker anymore.

Granted, for the last five years Peter Parker wasn't the most impressive person to be. The orphaned foster kid who got a box of donated things for Christmas (and another Christmas was just around the corner. Boxes came, sometimes, donated by some charitable organization for kids in need. They never separated out for teenagers, though, so Peter had been getting stuffed animals and CDs (CDs!) long after they had any appeal). Peter Parker, who had the wrong clothes and the wrong hair cut and didn't even have a cell phone. Peter Parker, who was, apparently, the luckiest boy in New York.

Ned called out people on his behalf, but by last period-Peter had BC Calculus, taken with Seniors, Ned a whiz when it came to computers but a step behind in pure math-Peter just wanted to get the hell out of school.

Funny, right? He'd begged Tony to take him so he could keep attending Midtown, and now Midtown was the last place he wanted to be.

The problem was that people weren't even talking to him. They were talking behind him, about him, pointing and staring. Peter slammed his locker shut as a couple of Freshman girls walked by. "That's the guy! The guy you were talking about!"

They didn't even lower their voices. Peter felt his cheeks burn.

"You've sure got the rumor mill up and running," MJ noted. She was sitting in the middle of the hall, cross-legged, laptop balanced on her knees as two thousand high schoolers rushed past. Peter slid down the wall beside her.

"Luckiest boy in New York." Peter tried to laugh. It came out wrong. "I'll make a button for tomorrow."

"I assume you would have gotten around to telling me eventually." MJ pointedly didn't look up.

Peter rolled his eyes. "It just happened. The Hannigans..." he gestured at his face.

"I showed you how to makeup bruises the last time your face met a fist. Beauty tutorials are an abuse victim's best friend."

"Don't call me an abuse victim, MJ, come on. Anyway, I lost the makeup, like, two moves ago."

MJ snapped her laptop shut and shoved it in her backpack, pulling out a ratty makeup bag from somewhere in its depths. Girls were the best. Shoes, boots, winter clothes stomped by as Peter turned his face to MJ's ministrations, trying not to wince as she spread concealer over his eye and cheekbone.

"There's cameras outside," MJ murmured. Her breath smelled like those green tea mints from Trader Joes that Peter bought her for her birthday, for Christmas, for passing a test. They were three-fifty a tin but MJ ate them like candy. And whenever Peter smelled them he thought of her. "You gotta keep up your reputation. Luckiest boys don't have bruises."

Peter smiled, just for her. "Are there really cameras?"

"Yup." MJ reached for a brush now. Something about feathering. Peter really had tried to watch those makeup tutorials. It was better than getting the pitying stares. "Look, I'm assuming you'll tell me everything when you're good and ready, but are you living in the Tower? Avengers Tower?"

MJ had a problem with the wanton destruction of property and flagrant disrespect for authority displayed by all of the Avengers but particularly Tony Stark. She had a problem with SI and their history of weapons manufacturing. She protested and wrote petitions and lectured Peter and Ned constantly about their Stark products.

"Yeah, sorry, MJ, it's just...they wanted to put me in this boys home like two hours away and then Mr. Stark showed up and I was like, holy shit, you know? And I know you don't like him but I needed-"

"A bed, food. I get it, Peter. I may not agree with Stark's business practices but even if this is just for the optics-and I'm sure it is-I'm glad you have somewhere to go. Even if it's just another stop in the road. What I'm trying to say is..." MJ smoothed down the foundation with the side of her thumb, a soothing stroke. "I don't know anything about Stark. Not really. But he lives with powerful people. Strong people. Hawkeye seems okay, I guess, and Dr. Banner is the boss, but...they could really hurt you. If they wanted to."

Her eyes were inches from his but she wasn't looking at him. It took a moment for Peter to catch her meaning. "They're not like that, MJ. I mean, I did end up at a party last night, and I guess Mr. Stark isn't the parenting type, but Captain America made me breakfast and lectured me on healthy choices. I know you...I know you lost your aunt, right? In the Battle of New York? But even if they're not the good guys, I don't think they'd hurt kids."

"You say that every time," MJ said, heat creeping into her tone. "And then you show up covered in bruises."

The flood of fleeing kids had turned into a trickle and Peter braced himself against the lockers to stand up. "Thanks, MJ, but I'm good."

"Peter-I just mean-"

"No, no, it's okay. Can you, um, can you tell Ned that I'm heading out? I'm going to try to, you know, figure out the new house rules. I'll see you guys tomorrow, okay?"

"Peter, wait-"

But he was already pulling up his hood, bracing for the cold. Some more people pointed at him and Peter felt MJ's eyes watch him walk away.

He glommed onto the end of a group, trying to blend in. There were indeed cameras, several

cameras just off school property, trained on the school. To their credit, several administrators were trying to herd the reporters away from the eager underage children. Peter ducked. Apparently not quickly enough.

"Hey! That's him!"

"In the hoodie!"

"Peter Parker, why did Tony Stark pick you of all people?"

"Will you be joining the Avengers?"

"What kind of product do you use in your hair?"

"Peter Parker, what did you do to get chosen?"

"What did you do?"

Someone tugged on his backpack and Peter was pulled back into a crowd. StarkPhones thrust in his face. Flashes going off. He struggled to keep his balance, trying to stammer responses.

Someone muscled their way to the front of the crowd. "Yeah, Parker, why would Tony Stark choose you?" a sneering voice. Peter stumbled, reached out a hand towards Flash. The school bully looked at it as if Peter was waving a piece of trash in front of his face. "What are you supposed to do for him?"

Like the reporter's question at the party. All the reporters no waiting to hear his response. As if Peter knew, as if he hadn't been trying to ask. He knew that everything had a price.

Someone grabbed his arm and Peter went to wrench himself away again. The grip tightened. "All questions about Peter Parker can be directed to Stark Industries," a smooth, female voice said. Pepper. Peter's stomach swooped. On the one hand, at least Tony wasn't trying to save him from the mob himself. On the other hand...why hadn't Tony Stark come himself. "Thank you!"

The practiced chirp at the end and the hurried pace was just enough to get Peter away from the mob. "Thanks, um, Mrs. Pepper. I mean, Mrs. Potts. Sorry. I could have totally taken the train."

"I hope it hasn't been like this all day," Pepper Potts sympathized as she steered Peter through the crowd. "Clint saw the feeds first, and then we had to keep Steve off of Twitter-he just discovered it, he's very righteous-I'm so sorry, Peter, I hoped to get ahead of this. We were going to make a statement by the end of the week, after you'd settled in, but I guess the party last night was a risk. We were promised no pictures but you'd think the owner of a tech company would understand just how small a camera can me. Now, get in. Oh, don't worry about the carpet sweetheart, you're a dear, get in now."

Peter slid into the bench back seat and recoiled against the door when he realized Tony Stark was in the driver's seat. Stark turned around in the seat. "So, high school's a bit different from what I remember. Granted, I graduated high school at twelve, but I imagined less blood thirsty reporters, more jocks and basket cases. Or maybe that was just the Breakfast Club."

Peter tried to laugh but it sounded strangled even to his own ears. He couldn't return Tony's intense gaze and so he settled on staring out the window. His cheek throbbed.

Tony began to peel away and Peter leaned against the cool glass, wondering if the reporters outside were getting the pictures they wanted.

Then he straightened up. "Wait!"

"What is it?" Pepper didn't look up from her phone.

Peter wondered if the windows were tinted. Wondered if Bug, standing on the edge of the crowd, could see Peter just as clearly as Peter could see him.

Maybe he could. Bug-older now, and taller, less pinched-looking, but still undeniably his old foster brother-raised his hand and waved at Peter. Peter blinked, made to wave back, but by the time he got his hand up Bug was gone again.

"What is it?" Tony asked this time.

Peter didn't answer. He was staring at the spot Bug had melted into. Shrugging, Tony backed up. Revved forward into the crowded city streets.

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There were more reporters at the Tower, which Tony blithely drove through. As if everyone had a secret underground garage. Peter kept glancing over his shoulder. He was sure he'd seen Bug, but why? He had sought the other boy out for years, as doggedly as he'd avoided Rooster.

He floated after Tony as the older man talked about security measures and protocol and Peter tuned it out halfway through, stepping into the elevator and letting it whisk him up to the penthouse.

The Avengers were assembled. Those that were in the country, anyway. Hawkeye, dressed head to toe in a purple tracksuit, was lying on the couch with a fully suited Phil Coulson; Captain America was in uniform, shield in hand, glaring at a Stark screen projected against the wall; Dr. Banner seemed determined to channel his energy into food-he was in the kitchen, surrounded by veggies, chopping away.

Still, even though Peter supposed to activity was about him no one really talked to him. Other than waves and smiles all the adults seemed content to shout at each other, leaving Peter free to drift over to the window and stare down at the reporters still milling below like ants.

"-JARVIS has been under attack all day, some kid hackers from China or some shit-"

"...low visibility on the ground, we're going to have to change that..."

"I wish I knew who took that picture!"

He had several hours of Calculus homework to get through and a paper on the Second Great Awakening that he'd been putting off for weeks. All the deadlines loomed large with Christmas barely a week away. Peter shivered again, even though the apartment was anything but cold.

"Peter?"

He snapped his head up. Phil Coulson's voice was quiet, patient, but that tone-he'd definitely said Peter's name more than once, and he'd just spaced out. "Um. Sorry. What was that?"

"I tried to contact you on your cell phone, but the number we have on file has been disabled."

Peter could still hear that snapping crunch of the cheat phone breaking open. "Yeah, that, um, I lost that? A little while ago."

Stares. All the Avengers' gazes on him and Peter sighed. "I had a job at this deli near school.

Nothing much but at least I could save something, you know? But then I got moved to the Hannigans and they didn't like me working outside the house, and the money I had saved up..." Peter shrugged. How do you explain to a bunch of ultra-rich adults that he'd spent ten bucks here to go see a movie with Ned, and three bucks on MJ's favorite mints, and a buck on chips, and his stash was getting lower and lower but anytime he didn't have to depend on the charity of his friends he felt a little more human?

He had forty-three dollars. That was what he'd managed to hang onto. Forty-three dollars, and he'd earmarked eight of those for Christmas presents for Ned and MJ. They deserved so much more-he suspected that Ned would use the holiday as an excuse to get him a new jacket, probably a very warm, very expensive one-but they were the best kind of friends, the kind that gave without expecting anything in return.

He had forty-three dollars. That wasn't enough for a phone and a data plan. That wasn't enough for anything, really.

"I wasn't aware anyone of your generation could function without a cell phone," Phil Coulson said, breaking up the silence. The agent poked Hawkeye in the shoulder. "You certainly couldn't survive a day."

"I've been undercover without a data plan," Hawkeye grunted. The phone between his thumbs wasn't helping his point. "Anyway, I'm a Millennial. He's Gen-Z. Two different beasts."

Peter hitched his backpack up higher on his shoulder. "Yeah. Well. Anyway, sir, if you need to contact me, you know, while I'm at school, I can give you my friend Ned's number? We have most classes together and he knows that I'm staying here and stuff."

"I would appreciate that, Peter. And please call me Phil."

Hawkeye grinned. "Yeah, only I get to call him 'sir.'"

Tony strode into the room as both Captain America and Dr. Banner groaned. "Kid, you were asking me about rules yesterday, remember? Well, I didn't think we'd have to get this basic but maybe I need to start from the beginning. Rule number one: if you're staying at the home of the guy who literally invented the smart phone, you need to have a damn smart phone."

He thrust a box into Peter's hand and started rattling off specs. Processing speed and RAM and resolution and "all StarkPhones have a Jarvis, of course, but this one is actually JARVIS, connected to the house. He'll also be keeping an eye on your search history, so don't go looking for the really kinky stuff."

Peter gently lifted the lid off of the box. His last phone had been a Samsung Galaxy, which he would never admit to Tony Stark's face. It had been bulky and cracked and nothing at all like this...this beauty.

"Oh my god," Peter ran his finger over the face of the phone. "Mr. Stark, this is so...so huge. What can I-can I pay you back? Please?"

"Rule number two," Tony held up two fingers. "Presents don't have to be repaid. If you have a hankering to do chores, Bruce has a thing for the kitchen and I'm sure he'd like an assistant, or you could help me in the lab, or you could just do your homework. I don't care. Not killing the paparazzi is literally your only assigned chore, and it's a daily struggle, I promise."

Tony held up a third finger. "Last rule. For now. I might add more later. But this is the big one,

kiddo. You gotta tell me when you need something."

"I didn't need a phone," Peter protested. "I mean, thank you, Mr. Stark, but I got by without one."

"When shit started going down this afternoon and we needed to get in touch with you, we couldn't. You may not have needed a phone before but you do now. Avengers Tower isn't just the name of the joint, kid, this is the real deal. There will be missions. There might be some real danger. Agent needs to be able to talk to you. I need to be able to talk to you. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Good." Tony looked relieved that the conversation was over. He stood there, then opened his arms, awkwardly. "Are we supposed to hug now? I feel like we're supposed to hug now."

Peter assessed the lines of the older man's body. "Not if you don't want to."

"Oh, thank god."

JARVIS spoke up from...well, from wherever he was. "Excuse me, but there is a person outside asking for Peter Parker."

"Keep all the reporters out, please, JARVIS. Don't you see we're having a moment?"

"He is not a reporter, sir. He claims to be Peter's friend."

All eyes on Peter, who shrugged. "Probably Ned. He kind of freaked when I told him you were fostering me. He has a huge crush on Black Widow."

"Don't we all," Hawkeye said. Phil Coulson smacked him lightly on the shoulder.

"Pull up picture, JARVIS."

"I apologize, sir, but my systems are still offline. Combating those hackers has been a bit of an issue. The most I can tell you is that he is dark-haired, alone, appears harmless."

Peter was nodding. "Definitely Ned. Can I show him the new phone? Can he come up here? Can he stay for dinner?"

Nodding heads all around. Calc homework could wait. This was the first time in years that Peter felt like a real person, with a place to invite people back to. He felt, for a blinding instant, like the luckiest boy in New York.

"Go get in trouble," Tony Stark ordered, shooing Peter out of the apartment.

He left his backpack, running into the elevator with his new phone in hand. He hadn't even turned it on—he wanted to share that with Ned, who was a bigger computer geek than he was. He was sure to freak out over whatever new gadgets were on this thing.

Only, when Peter stepped out of the elevator into the back alley next to the parking garage, away from the reporters, he didn't see Ned. Standing there, looking incredibly nervous, was the person he'd been looking for all afternoon.

"Bug!"

Bug was twisting his hands together. Peter had forgotten that he used to do that. Some kind of nervous tick, one hand inside other. "I'm real sorry about this, Pete. Really, I am."

Peter didn't have time to ask for an explanation. Someone tugged his arm, dragged him across the street, a different alley, cars honking, and then Peter tried to scream and someone swore and something slammed into the back of his head and Peter disappeared into the pain.

Easy Street

Chapter Summary

In which Peter is sick of being dragged places, Iron Man goes on the warpath, and someone ends up shot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Maybe she holds the key that little lady to getting more bucks --"

"Instead of less!"

"Maybe we fix the game with something...shady..."

-Rooster and Ms. Hannigan, from the musical *Annie*

.***.

Peter was an old hand at the things most people feared.

Those terrible things everyone spends their lives dreading? It had all hit Peter early. Dead parents, then dead everyone. Ripped away from his home, bounced around, losing all of his prized possessions early on. He'd been made caregiver to a dozen younger children, had been forced to sleep outside, had been shoved and slapped and starved. And he'd been lonely. Through much of it Peter was very, very aware that the only people on earth who kept track of where he was were Ned - best friend, confidant, brother, but also fifteen and doing too much for Peter already - and Mrs. Grace. Because she was paid to.

So, no, Peter wasn't afraid of much anymore. He'd seen it all. He'd seen things teenagers shouldn't see. He still believed in happy endings, but he also believed they no longer applied to him.

Case in point: getting kidnapped by a former foster family.

Peter blinked at the cramped car and rubbed his cheek absentmindedly. Somehow he'd always known he'd end up here.

Well, not here, exactly, bruised in the back seat of what was obviously Rooster's car, next to Bug, also bruised in the back seat of Rooster's car. But he'd long suspected that the life he worked so hard to maintain, the grades and friends and...life...was too beautiful and precious for someone like Peter to really get to keep.

"Peter..." a small voice near his elbow whispered. Again.

Peter huffed, burrowing deeper into his thin sweatshirt. "Shut up, Bug."

"I didn't want to, but, you know Rooster..."

"I don't want to hear it," Peter hissed.

"He made me do it!"

"Oh, sure. Like he made you lie to the cops?" Peter demanded. "You know how much trouble you got me in? I was this close to being sent to juvie. I almost lost my scholarship."

Bug flinched but he did shut up. He hadn't apologized, Peter noted. Not for going along with the lie two years ago, not for getting him nabbed now. And Peter knew that the system had screwed with Bug, that small bones and big eyes and long lashes had long made Bug the focus of unwanted attention. But they were getting too old to farm responsibility off on others, to pretend that they weren't at least in control of their own actions.

"Will you just shut up?" one of the big boys in the front seat drawled. He was a different boy from when Peter used to live with Rooster but in the ways that mattered all the big bruisers were the same; street-tough, gang-oriented, suspicious, sly, strong. The boy slapped a hand in the backseat and cuffed Bug around the ear.

So Bug was still the last and the least. No way up the totem pole.

The driver turned around. Another fighter of a boy. "So what the hell did you do to get yourself set up with Stark?"

Peter sighed. Apparently it was the only question he got asked anymore. "Nothing. I was just there when he walked in. Coincidence."

"That's what I said to Rooster," the driver said, not talking to anyone in particular. The windshield, or the traffic, or the car at large. "I said, 'Rooster,' I said, 'you want this to work, you gotta give the kid a week or two to settle in, make sure they actually like him.' Because old Roost, you know, he'd go on about what a pain in the ass you were. And since this whole business depends on Stark actually liking you, I told Rooster it was a bit of a stretch that he'd like you enough to bother after, what? Twenty-four hours?"

"Bother what?" Peter asked, although he thought he already knew.

They were driving into a particularly unsavory part of town.

"Once Rooster realized he knew that kid in all the pictures, I mean, of course he had to get in on the action."

Peter closed his eyes. The days were short and his cheek against the glass was cold. They were in a bad part of town. He didn't have a cell phone. No one would look for him, not unless Stark remembered, not unless Ned raised the alarm and someone listened.

"Nothing personal, kid," one of the bruisers said. And sounded like he actually meant it. There was years of scrapping in that one sad sentence. All four of the boys in the car were orphans or close to it. They all knew the score.

Kidnapping. Being held in an unknown location. Extortion.

The bruisers began hauling them out of the car and Peter felt himself folding up. Like a creased piece of paper that kept getting smoothed out, he could pretend that he was shiny and new, sometimes, but he sank into his old patterns quickly. Fold forward. Draw no attention.

Make yourself small.

"I mean, the money's just not rolling in anymore, not for old Rooster. This one job could be our

ticket out of here."

"You're seriously going to try to blackmail Tony Stark?" Peter didn't even have the energy to be angry. He just felt very, very tired. The same old shit had been going on without him. "You know he heads an entire cabinet department? He's an Avenger. He avenges. It's in the name."

"He might be an Avenger," the boy in the passenger seat said, "but he never met us, did he?"

Peter thumped his head back against the seat. He sometimes wondered why villains kept popping up to oppose the Avengers only to get crushed immediately, and now he understood - an outsized sense of importance, a manly bravado, perhaps just straight up stupidity. Rooster was the biggest player in Queens but he wasn't in the Avenger's stratosphere.

The small-time con artist had almost certainly messed with the wrong super hero, as long as that hero bothered to go looking for a foster kid who'd done nothing but cause him trouble.

Bug looked like he was about to say something again and Peter closed his eyes, trying to comfort himself with the thought that, even if Tony didn't like him very much (which was almost certainly the case), getting and then promptly losing a foster kid would probably be enough of a PR nightmare that he'd come find Peter just to avoid the ire of his publicist. And then...well, and then Peter probably would be sent back to Mrs. Grace, another failed foster placement, and he'd start all over again.

The boy in the passenger seat began tossing a knife absent-mindedly. Bug cowered in the seat well. Peter breathed in the icy air, idly thinking that they were a bare week away from Christmas.

The most wonderful time of the year indeed.

Clint balanced on the back of the couch. He already had the vent cover open. Two more seconds and he would have been in the clear - or, rather, in the vent.

But then Phil walked in.

Phil Coulson walking into most rooms would be a cause for Clint to light up like a fucking Christmas tree - or, at least, look slightly less sour than his usual resting bitch face. But with all the people in the living room and the reporters hanging around outside he just needed some space to breathe.

"I hear there's plenty of fresh air outside," Phil said pleasantly, one eyebrow arching delicately at the vent cover in Clint's hand.

"There's also an angry mob outside."

"You never seem to mind the mob when they're watching your ridiculous FaceTube videos."

Clint rolled his eyes. Phil knew damn well it was Facebook and YouTube, he just liked to pretend he was older and more out of the loop than he was. It used to make Phil uneasy that he was dating someone fifteen years his junior. Actually, scratch that, it still definitely made Phil uneasy, and that's even after the years of Clint all but begging to go out with him, even after Phil put in several layers of protections so they could remain an agent-handler relationship (Clint didn't trust any other handler) even as their personal lives evolved into something more, even after they had actual paperwork between them (that Phil insisted on) to protect Clint while he remained in a relationship with his immediate superior. There were still some days when Phil would ask Clint if he was okay,

if there was anything he needed, joking-but-not-joking about being too old for him. Always too old for him.

"I don't have to look at them when they're watching my FaceTube," Clint said, brushing all the baggage aside with what he hoped was a winning grin.

Phil suddenly looked out the window, brow furrowing.

"What? You double-parked or something?"

"I wonder if Peter walked directly into the jaws of that mob. He's been down there a long time."

Five minutes later an alarm sounded through Avengers Tower

Peter was shoved through a front door into a den-like entrance hall. He stumbled, was shoved into a wall by one of the bruisers, and tried to breathe even as he tried not to roll his eyes. This plan was obviously not even half-assed. Maybe a quarter-assed. He recognized this apartment. It was one of Rooster's usual hidey-holes, the Easy Street hangout, where cops were paid off to look the other way as various goods and people wandered through the establishment.

It was sure to be one of the first five places the Avengers would look. If the Avengers were looking.

Bug hovered in the doorway, not taking part in the rough-up Peter was experiencing but not doing anything to stop it, either. "I thought Rooster said he'd be here by now?"

"Missing your daddy?" one of the bruisers sing-songed.

"Nah, he's missing his girrrlfrienddd," the other boy said, drawing out the last word.

Bug went pink, then red, his fists balling at his sides. Peter, held in a choke-hold against the dirty wall, watched the progression with a sort of detached interest. But, predictably, Bug just turned his head away. And, just as predictably, the other bruising boy stepped forward.

"This is going to hurt you more than it's going to hurt me," the boy promised with a wicked grin.

And it did.

"Just to play devil's advocate," Clint said as he combed through his quiver, counting arrows, "I'm not entirely sure this is an Avengers problem."

"He may have only been here a day, but Peter is one of us," Steve said. He was still transforming into Captain America, the zipper on his top half broken. Clint didn't mind waiting as long as he got a good long look at those arms.

Tony, also half-dressed, was barking at JARVIS. Tony bickering with his machines was actually a fairly common sight, but it was usually You or Butterfingers on the receiving end of his tirade. JARVIS had long seemed immune, a part of the tower itself. The AI was apologetic even as it continued, with most of its power, to fend off cyber attacks.

"He's a kid Tony picked up at the pound yesterday. Don't give me that look, Cap, you know I'm the shoot-first guy. But if he was brought in to fix an image problem, is us going in guns blazing going

to help? Isn't this literally what the cops are supposed to do?"

"I thought you hated cops," Phil said without looking up from his phone. He'd been typing away for ten minutes straight. Clint was pretty sure he was either changing the position of satellites or calling in an airstrike.

Clint shrugged. Was there anyone who liked cops. "Just saying. Devil's advocate. Maybe full spandex isn't the best way to handle this."

"We're getting the kid," Tony growled. "What do you say, JARVIS? Get me the kid's location and all is forgiven."

There was a pause, like a hitch between breaths, and then the AI's smooth voice: "Coordinates are being sent to your suit, sir."

"How much is he asking for?" Peter asked. He couldn't open his left eye. He could barely open his mouth. He kept trying to cough but his throat felt like fire, and he kept feeling phantom hands around it even though the bruisers were on the other side of the room.

At school they often played the game 'what would you do if you woke up tomorrow with super powers?' Because they lived in a world where that could happen. You could be the next Captain America, or Black Widow, the next Daredevil. Usually super healing came along with the grab bag of super power gifts.

Today Peter didn't need all the powers. He just wanted one.

(Whenever they played that game, MJ would pick invisibility, so she could spy on meetings and get dirt on her enemies, and Ned would waffle between flying and super speed, because he was a retro nerd and Peter loved him. Peter usually went for invincibility. Skin like a armor. He could make himself into a shield. He could make himself unhurttable.)

He coughed, winced, tried again to raise his voice above a whisper. "How much is Rooster asking for?"

"Two million," Bug said. He was lookout, halfway down the hall, one eye on the door.

Peter knew he wasn't worth two million dollars. Most days he wasn't worth a hot meal. He snorted, then regretted he'd snorted. The bruisers had done their jobs, but they'd also stopped short of actually maiming him. They hadn't kicked in his teeth, or broken his ribs. There was restraint there, a hesitancy that showed they were still new. He didn't want to draw attention to the fact that he was still conscious, let alone with it enough to scoff.

"What do we have here?" a reedy New York accent called.

Bug sat up straight. The two boys stopped rifling through every cabinet for something to eat. And Rooster walked in the room.

Middle-aged, thin, tall, balding, Rooster dressed like a mobster, slicked his hair like a mobster, had heavy-lidded eyes and a slightly yellow smile. He liked to touch people when he talked to them, a hand on the shoulder or a clap on the back. His hands were always greasy. When he had to stay still he twitched, like a man constantly looking for a fix. And when his eyes landed on Peter, Peter shuddered. There was something dead in the gaze, like locking eyes with a corpse.

"Back to the fold. Kicking and screaming as it may be. Luckiest boy in New York, did you know that, Parker? You're on the news. Isn't that rich? I adopt a dozen foster sons out of the goodness of my heart..." a laugh from one of the bruisers turned into a cough. "And Stark gets all the credit for nabbing one. C'est la vie, right boys?"

"Um. Sure."

"He's never going to give you the money," Peter said. His voice a croak. "Either Iron Man's coming for me or he's not, but Tony Stark is not wiring you two million dollars."

Rooster flipped a coin, began playing it between his knuckles. "You know me, Petey. High risk, high reward. There's no turning back now."

Iron Man landed just outside the Easy Street apartment, though of course he didn't know it was called that. In the end he didn't hunt down Rooster's list of hideouts, or look at rap sheets. Nope, JARVIS just had to pull up the exact location of the tracker Clint had dropped in Peter's shoe last night.

"Old habits!" the archer claimed, blushing under Agent's level gaze.

Old habits or not, it got the entire squad (minus a leading lady and a green monster) to the location in record time. It was almost disappointing to land and not see an alien army, or attacking monkeys, or whatever the monster of the week was. This was just a green door, an abandoned street.

Hawkeye scrambled down from Iron Man's death-grip, canvassing the area and immediately shimmying up a drainpipe to a fire escape. Cap just sighed and began talking to Agent over the coms, verifying...something boring, probably.

Iron Man kicked in the door. Because he was straightforward like that.

It was almost ridiculous, the amount of relief he felt when the dust cleared and he saw Peter staring back at him. Scratch that --- it was definitely ridiculous. Because Peter was far from okay. Battered, bruised, bleeding, and held in a death grip with a gun pressed to his forehead, Peter was pretty much the definition of not okay.

Still, he was alive. And Iron Man could work with that.

"Now, really, is this any way to say hello?" the man holding the gun asked. Information began flooding Iron Man's screens. Alias Rooster. "And here I thought I was being a gentleman, hailing you first."

Cap had been on his six but had since disappeared. Iron Man didn't really feel the loss. He could practically feel Hawkeye getting into place as backup.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, I saw that. Two million, right? Do you take personal check or...?"

Gun muzzle pressing deeper into kid's soft skull? Check. Unchecked rage building up in Iron Man's admittedly frail chest? Double check.

"I know you super heroes are supposed to be faster than a speeding bullet," Rooster teased. "But do you really want to test that today? Pocket change between friends, that's all I'm asking for."

"Maybe you've heard a little policy? It's, like, all over those crime shows. CSI. SVU. Other...acronyms. Anyway. We don't negotiate with criminals."

"We?"

"Oh, you know. The Avengers."

As if on cue --- and later Tony would claim it was on cue, that he'd known about the plan all along, that he'd dropped the key word into conversation just in time --- Cap burst through the back door and pinned two smaller kid-goons that Iron Man honestly hadn't even seen. Almost at the same time, as if anxious about missing out on the action, Hawkeye flipped off the roof (Iron Man couldn't see it, eyes still locked on Peter, but he saw the video later on YouTube and it was beautiful, an acrobat's swan dive from three stories up ending in a neat somersault) and came up, arrow out, over Iron Man's shoulder.

Tony Stark grinned, and Iron Man's mask didn't move. "Check mate."

Rooster's smile had locked into place, like a sickly clown's grin. "Sure. You win."

A gunshot rang out.

And Peter crumpled.

Chapter End Notes

Stay with me guys, there's one more chapter. The wrap-up is going to be part finishing up the story line, part Christmas fluff. Because it's high summer and I need to imagine snow.

Finale (I Don't Need Anything But You/Tomorrow)

Chapter Summary

After his kidnapping, Peter's a bit of a mess. Luckily he's got real-life superheroes to get him through it.

And yes, one of those superheroes is Ned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Yesterday was plain awful, but that's not now, that's then."

-from the musical Annie

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Thirty-five seconds after the gunshot

Peter blinked into a world of noise.

Clint's voice, indignant and petulant in a way that betrayed his youth: "that wasn't a miss, Cap! I never miss! I was aiming for his hand! Here, back up, I'll put another arrow in him. Well, turn the other way, then! Plausible deniability!"

Bug, in tears: "Oh my god mister, I mean, mister Captain, I mean, America, is Peter okay? Oh my god, that's blood isn't it? Am I going to jail? Rooster made me do it, okay? Is Peter okay?"

Rooster, howling in pain. The two bruisers cursing, shouting about rights, and due process, and how this was still America. And then the whoosh of a face mask being disengaged. A surprisingly soft voice surprisingly close. "You want to open those eyes all the way or you plan to play possum a little longer?"

Peter grinned weakly. "Nice to know Iron Man still cares about the little guys."

"Not just any little guy, Peter. You get lost, I come to find you. Period."

Peter tried to lift his head and got clucked at in rebuke. Apparently Clint had released an arrow an instant before the shot got off. The arrow hit Rooster's gun hand and knocked the bullet off course, but it still scraped the back of Peter's head. It sounded pretty bad - he'd still been shot in the head, after all, and at point-blank range - and it actually felt pretty bad, too. Like the side of his face was on fire. He moaned, a little. He didn't mean to. He knew being grazed by a bullet ("can't even see bone! It'll bleed like a bitch but you're fine, I promise!") was small potatoes compared to everything Iron Man had gone through. But. He felt weepy at the thought of it. Hot and cold all over.

And his face really, really hurt.

Peter squeezed his eyes shut, willing the tears away. "You don't even know me," he protested. "We

met yesterday."

"And what a twenty-four hours, right kid? I mean, if this is what day one is like with you..." Tony trailed off. His tone shifted. Gentle, again. "Hey, kid. Peter. I promise you're okay. We got you. You're okay."

"I'm not -" but a sob had entered Peter's voice, lodged halfway up his throat. "I just...my head..."

One of Iron Man's gloves pointed at his face and a cool numbing spray was released on his left side. "Point-blank range is no joke, you're a little burned from the blast. You'll probably have Hawkeye all over you until you're healed, by the way, he takes it personally when he misses."

"I didn't miss!" Clint yelled from somewhere else in the house.

The numbing spray worked immediately, the throbbing agony dulled to a steady hum. But the tears kept coming. Thicker and faster now. Peter tried to curl in on himself and remembered that he was hurt elsewhere, hurt everywhere, and he felt so small, suddenly, and so useless, and so incredibly young. He tried to bring up one of his hands to cover his face. He felt blood instead. And somehow that's what did it. He started crying in front of his childhood hero.

"Let it out, Peter. You're okay. You're okay. Look, here comes the cavalry."

Agent Coulson strode through the door, perfectly unruffled as ever, even as the street behind him filled with sirens.

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Six hours after the gunshot

Ned showed up at the hospital with reinforcements.

His mother was a formidable woman at not-quite-five-feet tall. She'd known Peter since he was in kindergarten and had watched the trials he'd gone through with compassion and fury. More than once she'd downloaded the foster parent application checklist, getting dispirited all over again at the impossible things it asked for. A social security card for one. She wasn't an American citizen.

Still, she argued with the social workers, because she thought someone should. "If I was his family," she quivered, "he'd come to me first, no question. I want him. We want him."

"Yes," the tired, kind woman at the other end of the line said, a tad impatiently. "But you're not family, are you?"

So when Ned came home from school and told her that Tony Stark, out of nowhere, waltzed in and became Peter's foster parent? Mrs. Leeds just closed her eyes and breathed in the injustice of it all. And then she opened her eyes and saw Ned's open concern staring back at her. She loved Peter, wanted to save him from this life of stops and starts that he'd been thrust into, but she also loved her son and worried, every time Peter was moved, about the growing bags under Ned's eyes. A boy shouldn't worry about their best friend the way that Ned worried about Peter.

And you never quite made best friends the way you did in childhood.

And then the kidnapping, the news - Mrs. Leeds was already out the door. She worked in administration at New York-Presbyterian, hiring nurses. She had contacts all over the city. She knew where Peter was going before Twitter did.

All this to explain how a petite South Asian woman ended up in the face of the most powerful man in the world. She'd lost her accent years ago but the high vowels of the island crept back when she was angry. And boy was she angry.

"You have him one day! One day! And he end up in hospital! You big man, Mr. Stark, bu you don't know taking care of child!"

"Mama," Ned murmured, eyes on the floor. "Stop yelling at Iron Man."

"I will yell at him who hurts my Peter!"

They stood in the hallway outside Peter's room, this odd cast of characters. A man in a business suit. Captain America. Tony Stark. All three men seemingly baffled by the appearance of a raging mother and her sweaty teenager.

Ned, looking desperately at Peter's door, didn't quite look at anyone when he asked, desperately, "Is Peter going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine," Captain America (holy shit! Captain America!) answered.

One of the ceiling tiles trembled and Hawkeye dropped through. He planted himself next to the suit with his hands shoved in his pockets. "The head wound stopped bleeding and they're working on the burn now. Had to shave half his head, but he'll look okay in a month or so. Shouldn't scar too badly."

Ned's hand flew to his mouth and every adult in the room, even his mother, seemed surprised to see the teenager begin to cry. It had been a long, long day. "So it's true? He was really shot?"

"Yes," the man in the suit said at the same time that Iron Man said, "No," and Hawkeye said, "Barely."

A doctor poked his head out of the room. "Anesthesia's wearing off and I don't want to give a kid this size more. We're almost done here but if one of you can help us keep him calm...?"

Ned sidled through the door. Before it closed, he saw his mom turn back to Iron Man, finger pointed in his face.

It had been a long, long day.

Seven and a half hours after the gunshot

"It was so stupid," Peter muttered to Ned. Half his face was numb which slurred his words but he was too nauseous to sleep and the hospital was too loud and Ned was sort of camping out in the room and glaring at everyone. He really was the best sort of friend. "Just Rooster being Rooster."

"I always hated that guy," Ned chimed in. He was halfway through Peter's pudding cup, glancing between the door and the ceiling, expecting Hawkeye to slide through the vent.

Peter laughed weakly. "No you didn't. You said you liked his hats."

They lapsed into silence, or the hospital approximation of silence, which still involved an awful lot of beeps and whirs. Peter touched his hair again. The place where it had been. "Is Mrs. Grace still out there?"

"No way are you going to stay with the Avengers after this. Sorry, Peter, but I think a kidnapping disqualified Mr. Stark, like, for life."

"He got me back, though. He didn't kidnap me. He saved me."

"After you got hurt."

"I've been hurt before," Peter snapped. "No one cared then."

"I did." Ned's voice cracked.

Peter stopped petting his newly bald head and reached a fumbling hand towards his friend. They stayed like that, attached, two boys who suddenly felt very young, and very small, as the remains of the day swirled around them.

Four days after the gunshot

Miraculously, even after the kidnapping and subsequent rescue, even after the hospital visit, Tony managed to retain custody of Peter, helped by an impassioned speech from Captain America and repeated reassurances from Pepper. It also helped, of course, that one of his many foundations made several large donations to various foster funds. News outlets got wind of the money, of course, and ran stories all week, including one by the Daily Bugle: "Did Tony Stark Just BUY a Child?!"

Before any of that happened, though, Tony sat in the room with Peter. He was a man used to seeing the depths of his mistakes up close and even he found it hard to stay next to this boy, who wasn't angry ("well, not at you of course, Mr. Stark. I'm mad at Rooster and I'm kind of mad at Bug. Really mad at Bug. Is that bad?") But instead, with Tony, he just seemed incredibly...sad.

Tony didn't know this boy well enough to make a guess at what could make him feel better, so he talked about what he did to feel better. Amped up security at the tower, an extra bank of servers for JARVIS - freed from hacker control once again - special protections around Peter's room. His own passkey that even Tony wouldn't have access to, panic room, access from his bedroom closet to an emergency exit, "and of course I'm tracking your phone."

"I'd expect nothing less." Peter nodded solemnly, a hint of a smile around his mouth.

Most of the burn had sunken to a mottled bruise. It was Friday. School was over until the New Year. Christmas was three days away. The city, swept into a tizzy over Peter's story, had settled into something like holiday cheer. A new layer of snow fell outside, and the beginning prickly fuzz of new hair had started to shadow Peter's wounds.

He'd been moved from the hospital room to Avenger's Tower, a room with more medical equipment than he'd thought possible. Tomorrow would be the first day he was released from bed rest, and Tony was already trying to think of ways to keep the kid from seeing how absolutely bonkers he'd gone with Christmas decorations throughout the apartment. Steve and Pepper had been cooking for days, somehow under the impression that holiday meals had to be homemade. Tony was reluctantly accepting the fact that since he was fostering Peter he'd actually gained two kids - Ned was over constantly, planting himself firmly by Peter's side every time an adult was in the room. The kid didn't exactly have the physique of an Avenger but he sure had the heart.

Tony sat next to Peter every night until the boy fell asleep. They talked about science and school and shitty sitcoms until Peter's breathing evened out and he was gone in that space between worlds

that sleep takes us.

Tony's own father had never sat up with him until he fell asleep, even in the aftermath of both of Tony's childhood kidnappings. But Howard Stark wasn't much of a father. Tony was determined to do better.

Five days after the gunshot

Clint had been on bed rest more times than he cared to remember, so he knew first hand what a bitch enforced nothingness could be. The first couple times, when he was just an angry kid and a liability, Phil would handcuff him to the bed, knowing he'd slip out otherwise. (The bondage wasn't what made Clint fall in love with the man; it was the fact that even as he put Clint in handcuffs he was settling into the hospital room. Phil was always there when Clint was recovering. Always.)

So Clint's the only one who's not surprised to see an upright teen before 7 am.

Peter's practically vibrating with pent-up energy - either that or the pain meds he's on. He wandered over to a cabinet and stood there, swaying forward on his toes.

"Any food you find is yours to eat," Clint said around a mouthful of Captain Crunch. He recognized the signs. He'd been in Peter's position himself, half starved but not wanting to risk a beating over some toast. "Except Thor's PopTarts."

"What happens if I eat Thor's PopTarts?" Peter opened the cabinet and blinked at the contents. For a team stuck at benefit dinners, like, every night, they did have rather overstuffed cupboards. They also had the Hulk and Cap and Thor who put food away like it was the end of the world.

Clint plucked more cereal off the shelf. He might not have one of the insane metabolisms but he could always join the kid for breakfast. "You eat one of those PopTarts and you risk magic, my friend. Magic is never good for you. Only thing worse is alien robots."

"I guess you'd know."

Peter still looked overwhelmed by the cupboard so Clint decided for him, grabbing some bananas and peanut butter and whole grain bread. Easy on the stomach after the meds this week.

Which reminded him: "Listen, kid."

"Why does everyone keep calling me kid?"

"I call it like I see it. Listen, I've made that shot before. Sorry the bullet got you. And that you got a face full of powder. That shit is no joke."

Peter shrugged. He was in an oversized Iron Man t-shirt. There was a bit of a war going on, trying to see who could slip the most merch into Peter's drawers and then which ones the kid would actually wear. Tony almost cried when Peter picked a Cap shirt for bed. "I guess I'm going to have to get used to it. Can you get used to it? the guns and stuff?"

Clint sidestepped the toaster. Some appliances shouldn't be sentient. He turned on the stove instead. He always liked his sandwiches grilled. "You get used to it. If you want I can show you some stuff on the range. But you don't have to. If you ever have another barrel pointed at you I think Tony would tear the world apart."

Peter snorted. "I don't think Tony cares that much. He's only known me a week. Not like we're family."

"Maybe not," Clint conceded. He had his own problems with the concept of family. "But you're part of the team. Not a full member, of course. Like a mascot. There's no time limit on team loyalty."

Peter looked surprised, and looked doubly surprised when Clint turned a beautifully browned sandwich out on a plate. "Can I ask you something? It's just that I saw that Netflix documentary."

Clint felt his face get hot. A series on the history of the Avengers, their tragic backstories, it had all been good PR but Clint had hated the project from the start. Cap and Tony were one thing - everyone knew their stories already. Thor was legend. Bruce, embarrassed, let them film the famous scientist but not the Big Guy. Nat disappeared mysteriously during the entire project, and Clint wanted to do the same but Phil did the eyebrow thing and Tony did the face thing and he was pretty much trapped. And then he was way, way too honest.

"Yes, I grew up in a circus. No, I don't know where my brother is. And the rumors are true."

"Which rumors?"

"All of them." Clint grinned but it was too practiced. He got these questions a lot. As if just because people saw it on TV it must make him some kind of public figure, and fuck that. He was a spy, dammit.

Peter's face when he bit into the sandwich was something to be enjoyed. When that kid enjoyed something he did it with his whole body. "Well, okay...sorry, forget I said anything."

"What?"

"No, really. It's like, way too personal. The kind of thing you might DM on Twitter but with you standing right here..." Peter took another bite. Some milk. That baggy t-shirt. Jesus he was really a kid. "It's just. You moved around a lot, too. Not like foster care but..."

"I've been orphaned since I was eight. I just ran away to the circus. Literally. I don't know which of us got stuck with the worse system."

"Definitely you."

Clint shrugged. Pain wasn't a competition. His childhood had been far from idyllic but it had shaped him. It had gotten him here, to this kitchen. To Phil. So, yeah, he was turned into a weapon by the man that was supposed to be his mentor but that same skill had saved him. "I think I know what you're going to say."

"You do? Cuz I was still working on it."

"You were going to ask if the moving ever stops. If you wake up one day and don't feel like the floor's falling out from under you. If I've still got a bag packed, waiting for it all to go sideways." Clint tore a strip off the top of the box. He didn't have to watch Peter nod. "Yeah, I've still got a bag packed. Back of the closet. Don't tell Phil, it'll make him sad."

"But you're an original Avenger!"

"I was unwanted for a long time before that. Hey. Don't look at me like that, kiddo, I'm just stating the facts. I know it's unhealthy, why do you think I keep it from my boyfriend? Tony won't kick

you out. Cap won't let him. Pepper won't let him. I won't let him. And your friend Ned's mom scared the crap out of him. But no one will blame you if you keep a bag packed. We're a group of runners."

Peter had finished the first half of the sandwich and was demolishing the second. He looked up from his single-minded concentration on food. "How old are you?"

Some days he felt ancient. "After this week? About a hundred and four."

"Yeah," Peter said. Clint couldn't stand to look at him anymore, the burned half of his face like a mocking reminder. "Yeah, me too."

Six days after the gunshot

Steve walked in on Peter opening and closing drawers. He stayed in the doorway, listening to the rummaging. Listening to the kid humming some Christmas tune. It was kind of nice that everything else changed but Frank Sinatra was still played at this time of year. Even if Steve could only take so much of it before changing the station, ghosts clouding his vision.

He only stepped all the way into the room when he saw Peter pocket a dollar bill. He knew he scared the kid. Peter was calling everyone else by name but still called him Cap or Sir. He also had a tendency to place himself on the other side of something, like a chair or a table, whenever Steve was in the room. It was the worst thing about the serum, how the little guys he was supposed to help were the same little guys who were afraid of him, now.

"Looking for something?" Steve asked as a second bill disappeared into a pocket.

Peter jumped, looking both scared and chagrined. So he was stealing. Kid could never become a full time criminal, it showed all over his face. "I just - I couldn't find Pepper, and I don't want to bother Mr...Tony...and I meant to, like, ask Ned for a couple of bucks yesterday because of course Rooster took all my money, and it wasn't a lot but it was all I had, and I need to top off my MetroCard, and I need to do it today, and I thought maybe if I could just find five dollars around..." Peter trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck. "I know I should have just asked but..."

"But it's embarrassing," Steve said, "to have to ask for everything. All the time."

"Yeah."

"I had nothing, once."

"I know, sir. And I bet you never stole."

"I didn't," Steve admitted. "But my friend did. Bucky. Maybe you've heard of him."

"He was a Howling Commando." Funny how even classified missions became common knowledge after seventy years. Steve suspected Bucky was in textbooks, somewhere. He hoped he was. He hoped people knew Bucky was brave.

"He was my best friend. He was taking care of his mother and siblings by the time we were ten. Taking care of me, too. Sometimes that meant saving me from bullies I picked fights with, but sometimes that meant giving me food or medicine. I knew he stole it. I was happy he stole it, even if it was wrong. When you've got nothing..." Steve spread his hands wide. "I hope you know that we'd give it to you, if you asked. We'd give you anything."

Peter ducked his head, cheeks aflame. He slipped the money out of his pocket and put it back in the drawer.

Steve knew that Tony didn't carry cash on him, but Steve liked the feeling of money in his pocket. The Depression was only a few years ago. He took out twenty dollars.

"Don't you want to know what I'm doing with it?"

Steve shrugged, already planning on how to approach Tony about an allowance. The problem wasn't the other man's generosity, it was his lack of restraint. He'd hear Peter was looking for change and give him a trust fund. "You've been cooped up in here for a week. Get out. See the city. Be frivolous." He was reluctant to give the kid orders, afraid he'd take the word as gospel, but... "Take someone. Ned, maybe?"

"I'm meeting up with him," Peter said, eyeing the money. "But first I, you know, every Christmas. Around Christmas, I guess. I kind of, well, I light some candles. For my parents. At this little chapel near school. I would have done it on the way home from school but..." Peter shrugged. He hadn't gone to classes all week. Work had been sent home. He'd deal with the fallout after the holidays. "It's dumb. I'm not, like, religious. But Mrs. Grace, she's been with me since they died, she took me the first year, and I've managed to go every year since."

How did they end up with a house full of orphans? "Is this a trip you usually take alone?"

Peter nodded. "It's not a secret. Ned knows about it, and MJ. She said that she lit some candles at her aunt's church, which is, like, the nicest thing ever, but I sort of what to do it myself."

"Of course you do."

Peter glanced at the money again. He was in a purple Hawkeye hoodie with sleeves that were too long. He took the bill and it disappeared in the depths of the jacket. "Thank you. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry for asking for things you need," Steve said, a little gruffly. He cleared his throat. "Be back for dinner. Bring your friends."

"I don't know if you guys are ready for MJ."

"Bring your friends," Steve repeated.

By the time Peter walked out the door, he was humming again. That old tune, that old war song. I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.

Steve settled into the living room and let the ghosts in.

Still six days after the gunshot

Phil was never quite sure where his place in Avengers Tower was. Mostly it was a place to crash between missions, hang out with his boyfriend away from the prying eyes of SHIELD, which wasn't homophobic, exactly, but...well, okay it was fairly homophobic, and Phil, eleven years older than impetuous Clint, could take the passive aggressive snark better than the famous Hawkeye could. They'd been living in Phil's tiny apartment before all the Avengers stuff went down. Clint had been more nostalgic about leaving than Phil had ("but...the plants!") It had never been much of a life. Work. Long missions. Short rests. Falling into bed with Clint. Work.

The Tower, though...it was more than just a place to live. Tony was a manic ball of energy, Pepper was shouldering most of the day-to-day operations of SI, Bruce created things and his from himself, the Widow popped in to make sure Clint was behaving himself. Clint had more plants. Captain America lived two doors down.

And now this kid.

Phil had made himself a scholar of Tower life. He liked to know how things worked, liked to know that Bruce would wander into the kitchen before sunrise because he liked to do Yoga with Pepper at the coffee shop on the twentieth floor. Liked to keep tabs on Thor's infrequent comings and goings (he seriously only seemed to show up when he needed to restock on PopTarts). Liked to know Steve's favorite drawing chair, and Tony's favorite mug, and Pepper's favorite tea.

And now he got a whole new subject to study. Not that he'd phrase it that way to Clint, who had balked against every aspect of SHIELD scrutiny from the beginning, hating the idea of being turned into an experiment. Phil had never been able to shake the analytical side, though, even for his boyfriend. He was an agent. He read situations. And what he read in Peter was...well...

Peter had only a bag full of belongings but they were still mostly confined to the bag. He hadn't so much invited his friends over to the Tower as they'd invited themselves, support pillars, and whenever they were around Peter apologized even more than he normally did, for noise, for breathing. He always asked before he took something to eat, even from the fruit bowl that was sitting, swipable, on the table. And now his eyes were wide as he slipped, breathless, into Phil and Clint's apartment.

"Sorry! Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I thought this was a closet. There's so many closets. I got all turned around. There's totally an apartment in here. Wow. Sorry. I'm going."

"It's an intimidatingly large living space," Phil said, putting his Kindle aside. Every year he reread *The Lord of the Rings* as a Christmas present to himself, but even hobbits could wait. "I drew maps when I first moved in. If you're looking for something, don't be afraid to ask JARVIS."

"I am, of course, always at your assistance," JARVIS assured them.

"Or I could help," Phil fished. He felt a little bad using his interrogation techniques on a teenager, but reassured himself with the same logic that always worked when his work became ethically blurry: more information meant more ways to treat the wound. "Are you looking for a pantry? A panic room?"

"Is there actually a panic room? I thought Mr...Tony was joking."

"There are several," JARVIS slipped in smoothly. Holographic arrows appeared midair, blinking in various directions, lighting a path to safety.

Phil wished there was a way to glare at an AI. Not that the system shouldn't help Peter, but when Phil was trying to help Peter, the helping was less helpful, you know? "So where'd you get turned around on your way to?"

Peter flushed all the way to his ears. Phil mentally crossed 'lying' off the list of the kid's many talents. "What-what are you even doing here, um, sir? It's just Hawkeye, I mean Clint -why does everyone have so many names? He was saying that you guys usually go to see your family. That there's real snow and a Christmas tree and hot chocolate and everything."

"We moved our visit to New Years," Phil said, noting the awkward change of subject.

"I just hope Clint still doesn't feel bad about the shot and all. He's the only reason I'm still alive."

Phil knew that. He was surprised that Peter did. "If you could mention that when he's in the vicinity, the reassurance would be appreciated."

"I just always kind of assume he's in a vent right above me."

Peter glanced at the ceiling. Phil glanced up, too. It was not a bad assumption to be making. Clint made vent climbing such a habit that Tony had installed seating in the ceiling for their resident hawk.

"Anyway, we're not missing much. Most of my family is scattered this year. We always find ways back to each other. The date doesn't matter."

Phil didn't talk about his family much. As a SHIELD agent, he knew that his civilian life could easily be used against him. As a member of the Tower, in whatever capacity he existed here, it always felt like the height of rudeness, bringing up his family when everyone else in the Tower, save Thor, had none. Sure enough Peter was already showing the pinched look that showed in the edges of all orphans, no matter their age. The expression of a lifetime of birthday wishes never granted.

So Phil changed the subject right back. "We really do want to help you settle in here, Peter. If you're still feeling lost..."

"I was looking for Christmas presents," Peter blurted. Then rubbed the back of his neck. "Not, uh, that I need anything. At all."

Phil could think of many things that Peter needed. A MetroCard that refilled automatically. A new laptop. But how to traverse the space between want and need was a problem Peter might have to solve alone.

"It's just that I'm afraid that Tony got me something, like, crazy. I mean, have you seen the apartment? There are eleven Christmas trees. One had an actual partridge in it until Cap said it was a safety hazard. One of the labs has snow in it. Real snow! If this is decorating I just think there might be something really, really awesome as a present and I was trying to find out what it was so I could try...not that I could get anything half as good. I have, like, no money. But I can prepare, a little."

Phil didn't know what the gift was, but he agreed with Peter; it was probably extravagant. Tony had never learned the meaning of the word restraint. "You know that no one is expecting anything from you?"

Peter's face fell and Phil cursed his innate ability to place foot firmly in mouth. "What I mean is; you're a child, we are adults. We get to give you things, and you get to say thank you. You get the gift, and you say thank you. That's it. That's all we need from you."

He had done this speech once before, for a new teenaged recruit who had known only the makeshift family of a carnival and the real family of a brother who'd left him for dead. Clint hadn't known how to accept things, either; not help, not gifts, not even food. Hackles rising at the suggestion of a handout. Phil had to coax him through his first surprise birthday party, whispering to then-eighteen-year-old Hawkeye as if he really was a frightened bird.

"I just..." Peter's hands fluttered by his side. "I feel like I've been taking a bunch of stuff. And I don't want to seem, like, ungrateful. Because I'm not. At all."

"Sometimes we don't get to be the givers," Phil mused. He got up, trying to think of where Tony could be hiding what was inevitably a very large stash of presents. "Sometimes we just have to sit back and let other people say 'you're welcome.'"

Seven days after the gunshot

This was not how Tony imagined spending Christmas Eve.

Not that it had ever been a part of his life. The religious thing. Keep the Christ in Christmas and all that. He didn't see the point, and was frankly baffled by the stories he'd picked up from being alive in America - a baby, kings traveling to see him, no room at the inn, show up to be counted, traveling all that distance while pregnant with the son of God. It all seemed a bit suspicious to Tony, but Bruce told him he had a naturally suspicious nature. He preferred science-honed skepticism. He might wander into a church if they had a Q&A period but that, apparently, was not how things worked.

So the God thing, that was out, but the actually holiday? Gift giving and Santa and things beginning to look a lot like Christmas? Tony secretly ate that shit up. Even when he was in his twenties and basically a mess he liked to be generous, liked the excuse to give things away. It's Christmas, have a car, have a party, have a building. It's Christmas, let me give stuff away.

And then once the Avengers got in his life? Forget it. Finally he had a band of misfit toys to match up with perfect presents. And then Peter.

Santa Claus and ho ho ho, that's what Christmas Eve was for. Egg nog and Bing Crosby that everyone pretended they hated and secretly loved. A big dinner and football playing somewhere in the apartment even though none of them were sports fans. Snow swirling and stories. Bruce showing up just in the nick of time. Pepper wrapping Peter in a sweater. Hot chocolate and blankets. The sort of Christmas he'd had only as a child, before he was shipped to boarding school, after Jarvis the First had begun to bring him home for the holidays.

Those were his happiest memories. Not being a Stark. Something else for his therapist, surely, but also something he'd been determined to replicate with Peter. Until...

"But if it's been there for this long, can't it wait until after Christmas?" Tony asked when Peter, red-faced, had told him/asked him/informed him that he'd be spending the afternoon in Queens, picking up a shoebox from his old foster house. Apparently in the chaos of his leaving he'd forgotten it under the bed.

"Well, I just know that if they find it they'll chuck it. Ms. Hannigan is sort of, you know, spiteful like that. Plus it has Ned and MJ's present, which is kind of dumb but we're supposed to be getting together at the end of the week and I know they got me stuff even though I kept telling them not to and I'll look really really awful if I don't have something. And I do have something! I just need to, you know, grab it."

"You want to traipse across town."

"It's like eleven stops on the train..."

"To pick up a shoebox?"

"I'm pretty sure it's still there. I have my MetroCard and everything, I just wanted to let you know that I'll be gone, for, like only a couple hours. I know we have dinner and stuff but..." Peter trailed

off, brow knitting. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to decide how many jackets you need."

"I survived this long on just the one, thanks. Are you seriously bundling me up? I know how to get dressed!"

"First of all, no you don't. Second, not all these are for you. The cold air does nothing for my skin."

Peter's confusion morphed into something like alarm. "You don't have to come!"

Tony rolled his eyes, his go-to response since he was little of people telling him what he did and didn't have to do. "Bring the car around, would you JARVIS?"

"Certainly, sir."

Still a little green around the edges, Peter allowed himself to be steered bodily out of the room.

Usually Peter was the one rambling around Tony, but on the way into Queens the kid got suspiciously quiet, and Tony's own ability to run his mouth showed full force. "Look, I'll be the first to admit I don't know the price of milk, but is this really what the rest of the city looks like? JARVIS, remind me to call the mayor."

"On Christmas Eve?" The AI asked. Wryly. For a computer.

"Obviously not on Christmas Eve."

"What will you tell him?"

"That his city is filthy." Tony glanced at Peter, expecting to see the the indignant bristling he was growing to love. Throwing barbs at the teen was his new favorite past-time, but Peter just stared morosely out the window. "This one," he muttered, pointing at - Tony wasn't just imagining it; objectively, this was the worst house on the street.

Tony sent JARVIS to circle the block - no reason to leave a car like that where just anyone could get it - and turned on the sidewalk to see Peter biting his lip. "What now?"

"It's just - it'll probably be easier if you don't come up."

"I'm easy!"

"You're conspicuous."

"In a neighborhood like this, kid, if you've taken a bath this year you're conspicuous. And it's non-negotiable. Christ, is that a needle? I feel like we traveled back through time."

But even Tony couldn't keep up the patter as they got into the building. He'd see some crummy places in his misspent youth but this was musty carpets, overfilled trash, a reeking puddle in the corner. He shivered. Midday and it was dark and cold. Tony didn't want to watch Peter climb the stairs, let alone think of the kid living here for months.

"Doesn't Social Services have standards?"

Peter shrugged, side-stepping a crushed beer can on his way up the stairs.

There were people watching them, Tony could feel it. Through peepholes and around corners. One

giggling druggy couple on the third floor landing burst out laughing at the sight of Tony. Another door closed sharply as they made their way down the hall.

"Almost there," Peter murmured. "Sorry..."

Tony couldn't listen to the teen apologize for the living situation he didn't choose. "Once you're in the middle of an alien invasion, everything else looks like paradise."

Peter smiled in a way that conveyed they both knew that wasn't true.

On the last floor, a door was wide open. A skinny dark-haired man in a wife beater leaned against the wall. "Evening, Petey."

Peter ducked his head over the key ring.

"Haven't seen you much. Old Hannigan at it again? You know you're welcome with me anytime."

"Sure, Ezra."

"This your new trick? Getting back on that horse on Christmas Eve? That's a mighty gamble with your immortal soul."

It took Tony several seconds to remember he didn't have his Iron Man bracers. And only one more second to decide to kill this man anyway.

"Why not come back over here," Ezra coaxed. "Ol' Hannigan never treated you right, anyway."

Peter's hands shook as he finally found the right key. Tony tried to remember which shrink down the line had taught him deep breathing exercises.

"It'll be cozy. The two of us. Or three of us, if your new friend wants to come along."

Tony slipped a hand into his jacket and pulled out a small hand gun. He pointed it at Ezra. Spoke around clenched teeth: "You're going to go back inside, shut that door, or God help me -"

"Tony!" Peter barked.

Exra slid back through the door. Tony kept the gun raised until he heard the lock on the door click into place.

"What the hell was that?" Peter hissed as Tony stuffed the gun back inside his coat.

"Me? What the hell about him?"

"I thought you hated guns!"

"TASER bullets. Don't change the subject."

The door opened and Peter had a hurried, awkward exchange with a foster kid who'd obviously taken his place. Tony had spent most of the ride over thinking about giving the Hannigans a piece of his mind but he didn't even get a glimpse of the couple, he just stood, fuming, in the small crummy hallway, glaring at Ezra's door.

The new foster kid (how these people could take in a new kid was beyond Tony's understanding) gave Peter his box in exchange for Peter's old key, and closed the door.

Tony kept glancing over his shoulder as they walked down the hallway.

"He's not following us."

"After that little exchange I can definitively say your sense of self-preservation is wildly off-kilter."

"You had to know most foster kids don't get their own Tower."

"And you have to know that this is unacceptable. On every level." Tony's voice got louder as they stepped outside, the new layer of snow muffling the city, amplifying his shouts to the rooftops.

Peter, small and shivering in an Iron Man sweatshirt, scrubbed a sleeve over his eyes. "I'm sorry, okay? You didn't have to come. I told you you didn't have to come."

"Of course I had to come. I had to meet Ezra!"

Peter blinked at the snow. "Please don't yell at me."

"I'm not yelling at you!" Tony yelled.

JARVIS pulled the car around. Peter huddled with his box in the backseat. "Okay," Tony conceded. "I was yelling, but I'm not mad at you. Really."

"Even after what Ezra said?" Peter muttered.

Yeah, that was probably an exchange to tell the shrink about. "Did you - before? With him?"

"No! But...he's said stuff before. He got me on the stairs once and..." Peter lifted a shoulder helplessly. "I don't know, it freaked me out. I stayed with Ned for a while."

Tony wondered, not for the first time, if he could save the world by throwing money at it. Probably not - that's where Iron Man came in. But this? Simple meanness, comments in a scummy house, a teenage vulnerable and alone? Iron Man couldn't fix this. And if he was really, rally honest with himself, he wasn't sure if Tony Stark could, either.

Maybe he'd try to talk Pepper into running for office again.

Tony was shaken from his reverie by the whisper of a lid coming off a shoe box. Oh, right. Traumatized kid at six o'clock. "I hope the loot was worth it," Tony said, which was about eight things down on the list of what he wanted to say.

"It's a game I designed for Ned and MJ. Ned's a better coder than me, but there wasn't much else to do at the Hannigans, and I knew I wouldn't be able to buy them anything. Don't tell Ned we went back there for it, though. He'll have kittens."

"Ned and I have a lot in common."

"In that case, can you stop calling him Ted?"

"Yesterday I called him Fred. Spice of life."

"You don't pretend to forget MJ's name."

"MJ has a certain quality about her, you know? Anyway. Changing the subject."

"Pot meet kettle," Peter whispered. A twitch of a smile. The snow was coming down heavier now.

Steve would be over the moon. The man believed in the power of a white Christmas. "It was dumb," Peter said after several blocks. "To go back there. I just remembered the shoe box, and I wanted everything to be -"

"Normal," Tony nodded. "I don't blame you for that, Peter." He paused, then had to add. "You know you're not living anywhere like that again."

"You can't promise that, Tony."

"On your case file, it says foster to adopt."

"I'm too old."

"Legally, you're never too old. I looked into it when the team started living with me. Thought about making Bruce my heir but couldn't stand the thought of the press and Daddy jokes."

Peter blinked. "Okay, legally but - only the little kids get adopted. Teens just age out and disappear."

Tony closed his eyes and saw the moldy carpets and broken windows of Peter's last living situation. It wasn't a life that encouraged hope, but seeing it, and seeing the spark of a kid in the backseat...if that boy isn't a living breathing miracle Tony didn't know what was.

"You're living with super heroes now. Anything is possible."

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Eight days after the gunshot

He let Peter have his Christmas morning, but by noon he started feeling jittery and by one o'clock his mother pushed him out the door with a bag full of Christmas food and orders to bring Peter back with him if Stark wasn't treating "her boy" right.

The streets were empty. Most shops were closed, and some shops were closing. Ned hurried down from the bitter cold of the streets to the stale cold of the train station. He sent MJ a Merry Christmas text just for the pleasure of seeing her "there is no God unless the absence in the cosmos can be known as God" rant in return. Four minutes until the next Manhattan-bound train.

Above ground again, frozen, he pulled his hood up and puffed his way through the festive streets, already dark in the bleak midwinter shadows.

""Scuze me -" Ned was always stopped by panhandlers. Peter said he had one of those faces. "Do you have anything to give? It's Christmas."

He was in the shadow of the Tower. Looked longingly at the door. But what could he do? It was Christmas. It was a veteran (according to his cardboard sign) with a well-fed looking pit bull by his feet. The pit bull smiled under a sweater and several hats. It was dressed better than its own.

Ned rifled through the backpack, coming up with five dollars and some yams, still warm and dusted with brown sugar. He handed both to the vet. "Do you have some place warm to go?"

"Most shelters don't like dogs, and I can't leave her. She saves me." The five dollars disappeared up the many layers. A scoop of yams was extracted for the dog to lick. She ate happily, tail wagging. "Bella," the vet said, "found in a trash bag. Someone tried to dump her."

Ned held a closed fist near Bella's nose. She licked him. Her warm tongue only reminded Ned how very cold he was. "There's a heating vent nearby," Ned said, keeping his gaze on Bella. "It's not indoors, but it's warm."

"Aye, the one by the superhero tower. Security chases me away."

"Not today," Ned said more confidently than he felt. "Not on Christmas."

Ned left the vet and Bella in the warm pocket near Avengers Tower. He cleared his throat as he entered the elevator. They studied JARVIS in his coding class - actually, JARVIS led sections of that class, or at least his accessible public persona did. But there wasn't a lesson on how to talk to an AI. "Um. Merry Christmas, JARVIS."

"Happy Christmas to you too, Ted."

Ned swallowed a grin. "Did Mr. Stark tell you to call me that?"

"I am attempting situational and call back humor. Is it working?"

"Oh yeah, it's great." Ned leaned against the glass elevator. The day was already sinking into dark blues and purples. From up here, the world suddenly looked small.

JARVIS kept talking. "On a scale of one to ten, with ten being very funny and one being..."

"I don't think you can quantify humor," Ned said, staring at the Chrysler building draped in gold. "Either it works or it doesn't."

"Humans are inscrutable," JARVIS sniffed, opening the doors to the penthouse.

Peter fidgeted at the entrance. Even with his shaved hair and still-healing burn, Ned thought that his friend had never looked better. His throat got a little less tight, the way it always did when he saw Peter here and whole. "Merry Christmas, Ted."

"I refuse to let that become a thing so I just won't acknowledge it," Ned sniffed. But he wrapped Peter in a hug anyway. "Merry Christmas. Is that a Hawkeye sweatshirt?"

"Purple seemed festive yet areligious."

"So your new superhero posse just gave you tons of their own merch for Christmas? Do you realize what a rabbit hole we've fallen into? Also, does it come in a two X?"

"Already ahead of you, Fred!" Hawkeye tossed a shirt on his head while simultaneously relieving him of his backpack. "Although I'm not usually so generous with people who have already given away perfectly good yams."

Ned, halfway through putting on the new shirt, blushed with his head and arm stuck in the same hole. "Sorry! I can bring you some later, maybe, we have tons at home but - how'd you know about the yams?"

"I'm tapped into every security camera in a five block radius. Don't worry about it, super hero stuff. Anyway, JARVIS pulled up your feed after you got off the train. Saw your little Good Samaritan act. Heard it, too." Tony pulled up a graphic to illustrate his speech, a wall of downtown New York. Ned couldn't read his tone at all. Annoyed? Bored? Pissed? Probably pissed.

"Oh, um, right. Sorry I, you know, offered up your building. I'm a sucker for dogs. And veterans."

Peter bumped his shoulder. "Bit softie."

"Ol' marshmallow," Ned confirmed. "You should see MJ, she has all these pre-prepared baggies for homeless women with, like, chapstick and tampons. I just gave away my ma's food. And her Tupperware. She might be mad about that."

"You did the right thing," Captain America said. Everyone else was in PJs or sweaters and he was pressed trousers and red white and blue. With Hawkeye purple socks. His serious expression lifted into a blinding smile. "Merry Christmas, Ned."

Ned nodded dumbly, then rounded on the others. "If a hundred year old war hero can remember my name...!"

Hawkeye and Mr. Stark laughed in his face. Peter steered him towards the Christmas tree. Well, one of the Christmas trees.

The whole suite of rooms was like the Christmas wing of a department store. It smelled amazing. It looked amazing, too. Holographic snow, real snow, glitter that looked like snow, ribbons on pillars. Pepper Potts and Phil Coulson were manning the kitchen. "I sort of imagined the Avengers having a big Christmas party," Ned confessed.

"Oh, everyone's already prepping me for New Years, since my first public party was a bit of a disaster. Apparently, the New Years party is actually, like, six days. And two cities. I'm going to LA!"

"You're going to LA? Dude, that's awesome! First plane, right?"

Peter looked like he was trying not to smile too much and was hopelessly failing. "There's also a thing in London but even Tony can't get me out of the country in under two weeks. Did you know I don't have a birth certificate?"

"Always knew you were an alien spy," Ned said sagely. He caught sight of wrapping paper covered in tiny Mjolnirs. "Not that that's a bad thing," he added quickly.

"Anyway, Christmas is for family." Peter practically glowed at the word.

They finally arrived at the right Christmas tree. It had all the evidence of present-opening underneath - scattered boxes and wrapping paper. Dr. Bruce Banner holding a kitten.

Ned could not stop the squeal that came out of his mouth, and it was testament to the strength of Peter's friendship that Peter just nodded and said, "I know, right?"

"Do either of you have experience with cats?" The coolest scientists in the world asked, holding up an arm. The tabby kitten clung to his sweater sleeve. "It seems this one is sticky."

"Dr. Banner holding a kitten. Peter, we have to get you on Twitter. You'd break the internet."

"Another science bro," Dr. Banner observed. "I want to drop by this school of yours, Peter. Apparently I'd be famous there. But don't go getting a social media, please. We don't want to challenge Clint in that, and I already have enough cameras on me during the day. Speaking of: Clint! Your present is eating me!"

Hawkeye ran into the room, barefoot, phone out. "Under the tree a little more, Brucey, gotta get a nice bright light on you."

"Green is not my color. Get your kitten, Clint, you're not the kid in the house anymore."

But Hawkeye wasn't listening. He was putting the picture on Twitter. Ned knew because he had notifications set up on his phone for all the Avengers. And Elon Musk. And Trump. He figured if he followed those accounts he'd get a ten minute warning if the world was going to end.

It was Peter who pried the kitten off the sweater,, one claw at a time. "She hasn't got a name yet. Clint gave her to Mr. Coulson for Christmas, but I guess he's kind of the whole team's cat."

Peter dumped the cat into Ned's open hands. She fit in one palm, gray and white fluff and a stubby tail. One eye was blue, the other black. She started gnawing Ned's thumb.

"I asked for names on Twitter, which is entirely unhelpful. I think "brown cat" is in the lead." Clint looked the cat in the eye. "Agnes," he suggested.

"I like Noel," Dr. Banner suggested.

"She's not regal enough for Noel," Clint dismissed.

"Nala?" Peter suggested.

"Did you not listen to the regal thing?"

Peter rolled his eyes at Ned. "This has been going on all day. There's no point in naming a cat, anyway. Everyone just calls cats whatever they want. One of my old houses, they had this big tabby that only answered to 'demon cat'."

Ned cocked his head at the cat, whose sharp teeth were making little headway re: the eating him thing. "Prudence," he declared.

The cat persisted in her chomping.

Hawkeye blinked. "Huh. Okay. Bruce, your chopped vegetable thing is on fire."

Dr. Banner scrambled to his feet. "What do you mean on fire?"

"Towering inferno, general chaos. Did I not mention that when I walked in?" Clint winked at Ned and Peter as Dr. Banner ran from the room. He gave the kitten a heavy pat. "Prudence," he mused before someone called his name from the kitchen. Probably something to do with the many alarms going off.

When Ned looked up, Peter's expression was...complicated. "What's up?"

"They all like you."

"Uh, no they don't. This cat has more of a name than I do. Also, I think Hawkeye stole my backpack."

Peter opened his mouth, glanced up, motioned for Ned to follow him. Not knowing what else to do, Ned lifted the kitten to shoulder height. It curled in the crook of his neck, nibbling on an ear, before clawing its way to his shoulder. Ned followed Peter to his bedroom.

There were several new additions since Ned had last been in here, and normally he'd be geeking out over the new StarkPad and Stark Computer sitting on the duvet, but Peter was pacing, and pacing Peter was never in the mood to answer Ned's technical questions. Maybe, if he was invited for dinner, he could grill Mr. Stark. And Dr. Banner. What a world they lived in.

"It's awful," Peter burst out. "I never actually cared about the families liking me. Not since I was real little, anyway. And now - I really, really care. And I'm going to blow it."

"Peter, no..."

"I mean, like, today. It's Christmas, and everyone does it so different. With my Mom and Dad, we slept in late and had ham and eggs for breakfast and opened up stockings. And I always thought that was normal until I had five Christmases with five different families. Remember the Trents? Church for eight hours, praying to Keep the Christ in Christmas. Rooster used it as an excuse to throw a huge party. The O'Donnolies told us all to stay in our rooms while the real family came by."

"You had know Mr. Stark wouldn't be like that," Ned reasoned.

"Of course he wasn't like that!" Peter snapped. "Today was amazing. It was - it was sweet and relaxed and everyone got thoughtful presents and Dr. Banner showed up wearing a Santa suit and Clint and Pepper have been in the kitchen for about a week and everyone got me a present and I just...just sat there like some spoiled kid."

"No one thinks you're a spoiled kid. No, really, Peter. No one. Everyone got you presents because...because they could, and it's Christmas, and you deserve it. I've been telling you that for years. You were -" Ned blinked quickly. "You were shot last week. People re happy you're alive. I'm happy you're alive."

Peter's pacing brought him within arm's length of Ned. He rocked forward on his heels and Ned caught him, clung to him.

"Luckiest boy in New York," Ned reminded him. Peter swiped a hand over his eyes and laughed.

"So..." Ned said once they finally pulled away from each other. "Do you think there's any chance I can go to London?"

"As my emotional support pal?"

"I mean, I was thinking more as an SI intern."

"You did not apply for that internship. Ned! Let me have Tony Stark."

"Oh, I put your name in, too."

"Ned!"

"I also applied to OsCorp."

From somewhere down the hall, a shout, "we do not mention OsCorp in this house, Fred!"

Ned laughed, grabbing the kitten, who had somehow migrated to Peter's shoulder, and tucking her back under his arm. "Wanna show me the new StarkPad?"

"This tech is crazy. You know the crappy Toshiba I was working with. I got a StarkPad and phone and laptop all in one day. Two phones! Tony said it was just in case I had the urge to take one apart."

"That sounds like an invitation. Want o take apart the new StarkPhone?"

The boys ended up dismantling a \$1500 phone in the middle of the living room while Hawkeye

livestreamed. The kitten batted tiny screws off the table. Bing Crosby sang about White Christmas as the smell of turkey and cranberries and cinnamon permeated the apartment. Tony got down on the carpet and showed them how to hack their screens. Captain America curled up on the couch and sketched a snow covered city. And Ned looked up, as dinner was called, to see Peter in the middle of it all, his eyes bright, staring at the living room with a screwdriver in hand.

"Luckiest boy in New York," Peter said. And this time it didn't sound like a joke at all.

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Three months after the gunshot

Three months after Peter was plucked from his social worker's office with a bad eye and thrust into a much more public, much more loving life, Tony got them tickets to see an "Annie" revival off Broadway.

Peter had lived in the city his whole life and had seen a grand total of two shows: Hamilton, because MJ got \$10 tickets and needed emotional support during the second act, and Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark with the drama club. Because art.

But Annie was better, even, than Hamilton. Tony tensed every time Rooster came on stage and mouthed along to "Easy Street."

"You know the words?" Peter gaped at intermission.

"I spend a lot of time in the lab. Sometimes my classic rock playlist isn't long enough."

"But...show tunes?"

"I designed Iron Man to show tunes."

Peter settled back in his seat. Sixth row center orchestra. He loved watching the happy crowd mill around, families taking a picture near the stage, couples rehashing the first act, gossipy old ladies sniffing over how the whole enterprise was going downhill.

Tony watched him watch the crowd then nodded, the way he always did when he came to some decision with an argument in his own mind. "I will allow you one selfie on the condition that you don't post it anywhere."

Peter suppressed a grin. "Why must you censor my social media?"

"Because Clint is insufferable when he thinks his status is being threatened."

Peter pretended to think about it. "Fine. But you have to hold up the Playbill. And I get to send it to Ned."

"Deal."

Other people were not-so-furtively snapping pictures of the two of them. There were several accounts devoted to tracking "America's favorite Dad" through the city, and Peter still wasn't used to opening up Twitter and seeing his own name trending because Tony rubbed him on the shoulder or whatever. Flash gave him grief about it, of course, but being America's favorite foster kid was surprisingly...easy. It helped that in lieu of a security detail he had JARVIS (the real JARVIS, not the Lite phone version) in his pocket.

The biggest difference was the jarring revelation of how much less he'd been settling for at his old placements.

Tony smiled for the picture and Peter sent it off to Ned and MJ and, just as the lights started flickered to signal the end of intermission, off to Clint, too. Half of those Peter Parker stalking accounts belonged to Hawkeye, though between the Avengers and SHIELD and annoying his boyfriend, Peter wasn't at all sure where the archer found the time.

There was more peril in the second act. A con. A kidnapping. Tony, under the guise of looking for more room in the cramped seats, threw an arm over Peter's shoulder as Rooster stalked the stage. But there was heart, too, in that over indulgent way of musicals. Peter had always thought himself immune to their charms - he hadn't even cried during Hamilton! - but even he found himself misty eyed as Daddy Warbucks and Annie reunited for good.

At the end there was a standing ovation, though they didn't stay for the final curtain call. It was part of Peter's new life, slipping in and out of events in ways that would draw the least amount of attention. The same had been true for LA (he had gone to LA, and to London, and Ned had even come with him to London and the two of them wandered around Covent Garden and bought the biggest cookies and milkshakes). But Peter didn't mind not seeing the very end. He'd seen the happy ending. That was enough.

He thought they'd go right back to the Tower, but instead Tony led them to a hotel where they had tea (hot chocolate for Peter, coffee for Tony, but it was called tea anyway) and sandwiches. Tony kept giving Peter odd looks until finally Peter said, "What? Was it the play? Was it too horrible?"

"No, I'm thinking of investing in the theater."

"You're kidding."

"Arts education in this country is in shambles. But no, let's not get sidetracked." - Peter swallowed a smile, they were always getting sidetracked - "Actually I wanted to talk to you about something. Your name came up, for one of the Stark internships."

A fist of dread clenched under Peter's ribs. "That was Ned! He - he put my name in, I don't know why. As a joke, I guess."

"You're a year younger than we usually hire, but you've got all the skills. I just wanted to let you know that before you got turned down."

"I didn't expect to get it! I forgot Ned even put my name in."

Tony leaned forward. "We might have to turn down Ned, too, although he did things on the coding test that he shouldn't do and I'd hate for him to go to OsCorp, so maybe we can find a way to keep him. That's a legal question. Conflict of interest."

"Because he's my friend?"

"Because he's the best friend of the boy who...damn." Tony suddenly sat back in the chair, looking around the room. It was a private corner of the restaurant. "This is so...I feel almost as if I should be down on one knee. Pepper said not to make it a production. You have her full support, by the way. Either way. No matter what -"

"Tony? What are you trying to say?"

Tony reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a packet of familiar papers. "You're listed as foster

to adopt. I called Mrs. Grace to confirm. I called everyone to confirm. Foster to adopt. And I'd like to. I know I'm not the typical American dad, right? I'm not firing up the barbecue or rooting for the home team or...but I think this is good, Peter. I think this is good and if you think the same thing than I'd like to make it official."

Peter stared at the papers. They were legal documents, he knew the type. From the Family Court of the State of New York.

Tony, who always seemed to be afraid of silence, rushed to fill it. "This would also make you my heir, though hopefully that's a long way off, and you don't have to take over SI if you don't want to. A portion of it belongs to Pepper anyway, and of course there's other shareholders, like Rhodey. But you'd be my legal heir, and you'd have a home. Always. For as long as you need one. For longer than that."

"I can't get a Stark Internship," Peter said slowly, processing, "because you want to...adopt me?"

Tony flashed a smile. "You sound so surprised."

"I am surprised. What happened to our original deal? A PR stunt. I'm the cute kid you take photos with and you let me live somewhere closer to school."

"That deal's still there. Peter, I want to be clear about this: you don't have to say yes. Nothing has to change. Whether you're my temporary or my son, I will be here to take care of you."

He said the last in a way that was full of confidence, full of Iron Man. Full of love. Eyes blazing. Peter had to look away. This was more than Christmas, more than wandering around London in the sun feeling like a boy dropped into the end credits of a movie. This was a real life happy ending. And there was only one answer:

"Where do I sign?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay on the last chapter. Hopefully it's length makes up for the several months hiatus. Dedicated to my little sister. Told you I'd finish a story one of these days.

End Notes

I make no promises. I always say I'm definitely going to finish things but I don't. On the plus side, I envision this as a fairly small story. There will probably be a kidnapping, though, and that tends to drag on...

Happy finals to everyone who has to take them (especially my little sister. Happy last finals of college!!) Hope this helps with the stress. Thanks for all the comments so far! The reaction to this story has been amazing as I avoid grading my own student's papers.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!